SONIA MARRIED

STEPHEN McKENNA

M.C. MIGEL LIBRARY
AMERICAN PRINTING
HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

T.R.S.

c.1

43901-MIGEL-A

SONIA MARRIED

STEPHEN McKENNA

"As a clownish Fellow was driving his cart along a deep miry lane, the wheel stuck so fast in the clay, that his horse could not draw it out. Upon this he fell a bawling and praying to Hercules to come and help him. Hercules, looking down from a cloud, bid him not to lie there like an idle, dastardly booby as he was, but get up and whip his horse, and clap his shoulder stoutly to the wheel, adding that this was the only way for him to obtain assistance."

The Fables of Æsop: "Hercules and the Carter."

SONIA MARRIED

BY

STEPHEN McKENNA

AUTHOR OF "SONIA," "MIDAS AND SON," "NINETY-SIX HOURS' LEAVE," ETC.

NEW YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

COPYRIGHT, 1919,
BY GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

HV2345
M19S
copy 1

COPYRIGHT, 1919, BY THE METROPOLITAN PUBLICATIONS, INC.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

EPISTLE DEDICATORY

To WALTER FRANCIS ROCH

My dear Roch,

Ever since you read "SONIA" in manuscript, you have been the book's most generous critic. May I mark my gratitude for this and for a friendship older than "SONIA" by dedicating its successor to you? Perhaps you remember openly doubting whether in fact the spiritual shock of war could so change and steady Sonia as to make her a fitting wife for any man, O'Rane most of all; you may recollect my confessing that such a marriage of hysterical impulse contained the seeds of instant disaster.

Sequels are admittedly failures, but I look on this book less as a sequel than as an epilogue or footnote. Sonia was not to know happiness until she had suffered, and the sacrifice in the early days of war was to many a new and heady self-indulgence. It is the length of the war, the sickening repetition of one well-placed blow after another on the same bruised flesh that has tested the survivors. After a year of war O'Rane could have mustered many followers, when he murmured to himself, "I—all of us who were out there—have seen it. We can't forget. The courage, the cold, heart-breaking courage . . . and the smile on a dying man's face. . . . We must never let it be forgotten, we've earned the right. As long as a drunkard kicks his wife, or a child goes hungry, or a woman is driven through shame to disease and death. . . . Is it a great thing to ask? To demand of England to remember that the criminals and loafers and prostitutes are somebody's children, mothers and sisters? And that we've all been saved by a miracle of suffering? Is that too great

a strain on our chivalry? I'll go out if need be, but—but *must* we stand at street corners to tell what we've seen? To ask the bystanders—and ourselves—whether we went to war to preserve the right of inflicting pain?"

After four years of war do you find many traces of O'Rane's crusading spirit? Loring, he and a thousand others intrigued and pulled wires to be sent out before their turn; since they lost their lives or eyes or limbs, we have seen their places filled by men who were first jeered and shamed, later pricked and driven into the army, under the amused gaze of their more fortunate fellows who had intrigued and pulled wires to be kept at home! We have watched conscience being made a penal offence and persecution exalted into patriotism. We have seen self-denial, like self-sacrifice, made statutory; and the comprehensive plea of war has excused the recrudescence of that feverish licence which many of us superstitiously felt the war had been sent to end. Financially, morally and politically we were living on the last few hundreds of our capital. And in public life the war stepped in where honour feared to tread.

I dedicate this book to you in sympathy, because we would both recapture, if we could, O'Rane's first fine careless rapture. But there is little permanence in collective moral upheavals; action and reaction are equal and opposite, and the same violence which transformed the world in 1914 has hastened the return to pre-1914 conditions. The House of Commons, as you know it, and the society outside the House of Commons, as I know it, are not going to legislate a new world into existence in the spirit of the Constituent Assembly. We have worked, like old Bertrand Oakleigh, through the phases of extravagant hope and premature pessimism; we are tired and dispirited, chiefly anxious to end the strain, glad if we can curtail the slaughter, though we are growing used to this, but concerned more for securing the peace of the world in our lifetime than for declaring any other dividend on the lives which have been expended. "We shall be dazed and bruised before an end is made, laddie, staggering like

drunken men," as Dr. Burgess prophesied in "SONIA," "Peradventure, if ye speak of the Promised Land, men will arise and stone you with stones, saying, 'Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when ve sat by the fleshpots, and when we did eat bread to the full.' I am an old man, laddie, and old men and weary men, broken with the cares of this life, are fain to go back to the things they know."

What is left to those who are weak or obstinate enough to feel that the things they know are capable of improvement and that man is essentially perfectible? If a collective revival flicker to smoking extinction, can you attain the same results from the aggregate of individual efforts? O'Rane, you will find, tries both extremes.

Always cordially yours,

STEPHEN McKENNA.

Lincoln's Inn, 1918.

CONTENTS

		PAGE
	EPISTLE DEDICATORY	vii
CHAPTER		
I	AN ARABIAN NIGHT	15
II	THE OPEN DOOR	51
III	SONIA O'RANE	96
IV	THE DOOR CLOSED	146
V	THE LIMITS OF LOYALTY	191
VI	THE UNWRITTEN LAW	241
VII	THE DOOR RE-OPENED	291
VIII	SANCTUARY	338

SONIA MARRIED

SONIA MARRIED

CHAPTER ONE

AN ARABIAN NIGHT

". . . Is it not singular, and almost touching, to see Paris City drawn out, in the meek May nights, in civic ceremony, which they call *'Souper Fraternel,'* Brotherly Supper? . . . See it, O Night! With cheerfully pledged wine-cup, hobnobbing to the Reign of Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood, with their wives in best ribands, with their little ones romping round, the Citoyens, in frugal Love-feast, sit there. Night in her wide empire sees nothing similar. O my brothers, why is the reign of Brotherhood *not* come; It is come, it shall have come, say the Citoyens frugally hobnobbing.—Ah me! these everlasting stars, do they not look down 'like glistening eyes, bright with immortal pity, over the lot of man!' . . ."

THOMAS CARLYLE: *"French Revolution."*

I

AFTER twelve months in an Austrian internment camp, the roar and movement, the familiar smell and glare of London streets were stupefying.

I had arrived in Vienna a week before the mobilisation order was issued; my mission was to secure the services of certain physicians and surgeons for a new hospital which I had in contemplation, and, though I was conscious of unwonted restlessness, though my young friends in the Chancery were kept working late, the recent ultimatum to Servia could never, I felt, involve England in war. So time went by, the hotels emptied, but I preferred to trust my own judgement and went on trusting it until war had been declared. I knew Vienna so well, I had lived there so long and made so many friends from my earliest days

at the Embassy that I am afraid I continued to trust my judgement and to back my luck even after I had become technically scheduled as an enemy alien; and, when the reluctant authorities more in sorrow than anger placed me under surveillance, we all felt that a mistake had been made and that I should have only to ask for my release to obtain it. Was I not well over the most extravagant military age? Was I not physically unfit to bear arms? Could I not at any time have left Vienna with the Embassy Staff?

I was to find from August, 1914, until July, 1915, that the aspirations of the Litany for the well-being of prisoners and captives were neutralised by the reluctance of constituted authority to disturb the *status quo*. I was secure in my loose-box on a race-course five miles from Vienna; wire entanglements discouraged my comings and goings, arc-lamps laid me bare to the vigilance of the sentries; what good purpose could be served by setting me at large? My brother made the one appearance of his life in the House of Lords to raise me as an issue and to urge the exchange of civilian prisoners; memorials were presented to the Foreign Office; I am sorry to say that in the first convulsion of war I and my few thousand fellow prisoners did not matter.

I was interned for a twelvemonth. And, writing now in the third year of the war, I doubt whether I shall ever make good the knowledge which was then withheld from me. The newspapers were censored or inspired for purposes of propaganda; my colourless letters from England were enriched by half-page smears of indelible black. Between ignorance of what they might say and what I might receive, my correspondents confined themselves to business discussions and bald family history. My brother wrote of his son Archie's death in the retreat from Mons; my niece Yolande Manisty told me that she and her husband had moved into my house in Pont Street and were attending to my affairs as best they might. A further letter brought me the shocking news of Deryk Lancing's death on the eve

of war, with consequences to myself which I required many weeks to digest. . . . After that there were guarded and bewildered little notes from Felix Manisty, who is a greater archaeologist than man of affairs; there were voluminous technical enquiries from Hatherly, my solicitor, a weekly budget from Yolande and sporadic outbursts from friends who had heard of my internment and felt constrained to write one letter to cheer my loneliness.

In July, after a year of false starts, an exchange of prisoners was finally arranged; in the last week of the month I returned deviously through Switzerland and France, landed in a most unrecognisable England, reported myself at an equally unrecognisable Foreign Office and then stood, much as I had stood forty years earlier with a crowd of other shy new boys at Eton, wondering what I was expected to do next. In the roar and movement, the smell and glare of London streets, I had ceased to have any property. The people were different, there was an incredible number of soldiers about. And everyone seemed to have been getting on very satisfactorily without me. . . .

I remember walking a few steps towards the House of Commons, but I did not know whether the House was sitting; I turned back to Trafalgar Square with some idea of taking a train to Hampstead and visiting my office, but I had abandoned it for twelve months. If I called on Hatherly in Lincoln's Inn Fields, I should be told that he was at Ripley Court; if I went home, I should find that Yolande and Felix were both out. . . . It was salutary, I am sure, to find the measure of my importance, but it left me very lonely, I felt for some reason that not only was I not wanted but that I had no right to be there. England seemed to have been taken over as a going concern by a new management, which was in a great hurry. . . .

I passed through the Admiralty Arch and looked round me. New Zealanders and Australians, bronzed and big-boned in summer khaki, South Africans, with their hats pinched to a point, were strolling up and down the Strand, in twos and threes, gravely smoking cigarettes; a slow-

speaking Canadian enquired of me the way to Westminster Abbey; in St. James' Park two brakes passed me filled with Indian troops, turbaned, silent and undemonstrative. I remember that certain German prints had described the British Army as a menagerie. . . .

Through the Arch, I could see a stream of motor omnibuses hurrying into Trafalgar Square and displaying long posters in a red and white streak—"LORD KITCHENER WANTS YOU," "LEND YOUR STRONG RIGHT ARM"—on the Horse Guards' Parade recruits were waiting their turn by the long wooden sheds at the Downing Street end; the finished soldier came swinging down the Processional Avenue to the music of a drum and fife band, watched a little wistfully by a knot of men in service caps, blue jackets, loose red ties and grey trousers, sometimes pinned emptily at ankle, knee or hip. Standing on the kerb, a girl of twenty in deep mourning completed scene and sequence.

I was still gaping like a yokel, when I heard my name called and found my hand wrung by an officer in unfamiliar naval uniform; and, though we had sat and voted side by side during his short term in the House, though I had shot with him a dozen times at his place in Ireland, I had to look twice before I recognised him as George Oakleigh. We stood shaking hands, laughing, talking both at once and shaking hands again until he suggested that I should come into his room at the Admiralty for a cigarette and a talk. George, whom I had known as a dilettante journalist and political wire-puller, explained parenthetically that he had for a year been one of innumerable auxiliary civil servants; I did not need to be told that he was tired, overworked and vaguely, sullenly bitter.

"Fancy people going out and trying to slaughter one another on a day like this!" he cried, looking with pink-lidded eyes at the sparse trees and scanty shade amid the white flood of sunshine.

"Well, you'd go out, if you had the chance," I said.

"And hate it like Hell all the time!" he murmured re-

flectively, as he mechanically took a salute. "I've seen enough people in the casualty lists to realise that war is a dangerous occupation, Stornaway; and I've met enough fellows home on leave. . . . You know Jim Loring's gone, by the way?" His teeth grated together. "This—this is the very thing that my uncle Bertrand and I spent half-a-dozen years trying to avert! Well, I must be getting back to work. If this war's done nothing else, at least it's cured me of the conventional, twelve-to-three-with-two-hours-off-for-luncheon view of Government offices. With me it's nine-thirty to eight, six days' holiday in twelve months and about one week-end in three."

As I would not come into his office and waste his time there, we wasted it for a few moments more by the Cook monument. George tried to give me my bearings, interrupting himself to ask jerkily, "I suppose you've heard that Jack Summertown's dead? He was knocked out at the same time as your nephew. And Val Arden? . . ."

I had an additional tragedy in which Oakleigh did not share, for we were almost within sight of the house which poor Deryk Lancing had so proudly adorned: on such another day he had taken me over it, room by room; I had heard that he died on the very evening that war was declared, yet I suppose he only anticipated what would have come to anyone of his age in six months' time.

"I suppose you can't imagine what all this looks like to a man who's seeing it for the first time," I said. "All this drilling and training. How many of these fellows will come back, d'you suppose? And what are we going to get in return?"

He smiled wistfully.

"A lasting peace, I hope. It can never happen again, you know."

"I never thought it could happen this time," I said.

"Well, this is going to prove that war is a failure. Perhaps we needed the proof. . . . You'll find that after the war people will begin to do what we—you and Bertrand and I and a thousand more—tried to make them do before

—remove the incentive to war and the means of making war. There must be a general disarmament, the military machine must be broken. You'll find that Germany will be a confederated republic within twelve months—we can never make peace while there's a Hohenzollern at large. You know, Stornaway, this war's given us the opportunity of healing the sore places of Europe, and there's only one way to do it; when the peace conference begins to sit, it has got to divide the world according to nationalities. Belgium and France will have to be cleaned up first of all, and after that we must let the world go as it wants to go. Alsace-Lorraine will return to France; you'll find north and south Germany separating; Poland must be reconstituted; Italy will get back the Trentino and Trieste, though, of course, that leaves Austria without a port. . . . But you'll find Austria-Hungary splitting into a thousand pieces as soon as you apply the principle of nationality. I'm not sure about Constantinople, but I'm inclined to give it to Russia. . . . It's worth some sacrifice to clean up the international anomalies of the world and to make an end of war."

"It's going to be a big business, George, and a long business," was all that I would say.

"We're in sight of doing it," he asserted. "The moment we get within range of Constantinople, Turkey goes out of the war; she's on her last legs now. Then with Russia bursting in on the southeast and Italy pressing up from the south, Austria will be the next to go. People who know tell me she's on the verge of starvation. Then next spring we shall be bringing off a big offensive on the west. We're so frightfully handicapped now by lack of shells." He paused and looked at his watch. "By Jove, I must fly!" he exclaimed. "When shall I see you again? I'm dining with the Maurice Maitlands to-night and I happen to know that the Manistys are going to be there. Why don't you invite yourself? You're a lion, you know; and Connie Maitland will never forgive you, if anyone else catches hold of you first."

Leaving him to hurry into the Admiralty, I went slowly

on foot to Pont Street. England was an armed camp and munition factory, London a gigantic General Headquarters. And George, with his rimless eye-glasses enthusiastically askew and a normally pale face ecstatically flushed, was throwing corps here and divisions there, dividing the map of the world by the test of nationality. . . . I felt giddy.

There was no one at home, when I reached Pont Street, and I explored the havoc of war as it had invaded the house of a man to whom personal comfort means much. My butler, footman and chauffeur had enlisted, my car was wearing itself out in the service of an elderly general; the ground-floor gave office-room to a railway canteen organisation administered by my niece, and the rest of the house, when not allocated to herself or her husband, provided temporary accommodation for derelict officers and nurses. Never have I felt less wanted.

"But, darling uncle, there's so little that we *can* do!" Yolande exclaimed, trying to combine apology and self-defence. "I feel that if we don't pinch and scrape and slave. . . . And everyone's in the same boat. . . . I bought one black frock when Archie was killed, and I'm not going to buy another stitch till the war's over. I don't dine out once a month; and *then* I don't usually have time to dress."

She was looking a little thin and white-faced; for some reason the auburn hair which I loved had been cropped short, but she was undaunted and self-reliant, one of a hundred thousand women to whom the war was bringing that opportunity for service for which they had so long pined.

The emergence of my nephew Felix from a War Office car completed the sense of revolution and unreality. That least military of archaeologists was now arrayed in a staff captain's uniform, which accorded ill with his glasses and bald head, for duty behind a string of letters and a telephone extension at the War Office.

"You'll get used to it in time," Yolande laughed, as we set out on foot for Eaton Place.

My sense of not being wanted certainly evaporated in the warmth of Lady Maitland's greeting. One of her sons was home on leave from the Front, and the familiar, red-lacquer drawing-room was filling with a party of twenty-four, each of whom was acclaimed at a distance, introduced, epitomised and enlisted for charity or intrigue before he had fairly crossed the threshold.

"Yolande! My dear, I got your note and I've put off the committee till Friday," she cried, when our turn came and my niece surrendered to a resonant kiss on either cheek. "And dear Captain Manisty—there was something I wanted to see you about. . . . It'll come back to me. *And* Mr. Stornaway!" She surveyed me for a moment with her handsome square head on one side, then turned to a little group behind her. "My dears, we all thought he was dead! Mr. Stornaway, I want you all to myself, you're going to tell me all about your terrible hardships and, before you're a day older, you're going on my Prisoners of War Relief Committee." She turned again to explain me to the room. "This is Mr. Stornaway who's been interned in Austria all this time. He's going to tell us all about it. . . . Mr. Stornaway, it's a scandal, we can't get the Government to act. Now here's Mr. Deganway—you know him?—he's in the Foreign Office and he tells me that the question of the prisoners——"

She broke off to welcome two new arrivals with a surprised cry of "Lord Pentyre! And my dear Sir Harry Mordaunt!" as though she had not invited them. I shook hands with Maitland and was trying to see whom else I knew, when she returned and remorselessly introduced me to Vincent Grayle, with whom I have sat in the House for a dozen years. He was leaning on a stick, and I learned in a galloping exchange of biography that he had had one knee shattered in the Antwerp expedition and was now at the War Office, "cleaning up the mess made by the professional soldiers."

"But what were you doing out there at all?" I asked, clinging to him for a moment before Lady Maitland could

present me to anyone else. We had been contemporaries, if not friends, at Eton and Trinity, which meant that he was past fifty.

"Much too good a war to miss!" he answered with a laugh, hobbling away to be introduced to a young bride in half-mourning who had already collected two young Maitlands, Pentyre, Deganway and George Oakleigh.

"I expect you find everything a bit changed," said Maitland earnestly, glancing at his own uniform and speaking as though the war were a secret in which he was doubtfully initiating me.

"Grayle's much the same," I answered, looking enviously after the viking figure with the blue eyes, pink and white cheeks and corn-coloured hair.

There was a moment's silence, as my hostess mentally called the roll and I strolled away before her husband was ready with another platitude.

"Eleanor Ross is *always* late!" she complained. "Well, you haven't altered much, Mr. Stornaway."

Nor had she, I answered. The war seemed only to have turned her tireless energy into new channels. Whereas she had once called for the heads of Nationalists, strike leaders and, indeed, anyone with whom she chanced to be in temporary disagreement, she would now, I gathered, be content with the public execution of the Prime Minister, Mr. Ramsay Macdonald and Sir Ian Hamilton. She seemed the motive power of as many committees as ever; her house was the meeting-place of as many incongruities as before, and she was prepared to yoke the meanest of us to one or other of her charities.

"We must have a talk about the Prisoners," she said, with one eye on the door. "The Government will do *nothing,* but what do you expect?"

Lowering her voice, she confided that three Ministers, of whom I knew one to be a bachelor, were married to German wives, while a fourth was discovered to have arms stacked in his cellar and a wireless installation on his roof. She told me, further, that we had had enough of these

lawyer-politicians, that the country needed a Man, because the young shirkers that you met in the street were stealing the work of those who had patriotically enlisted; the Press, she went on to say, was a public danger (only exceeded in imbecile virus by the Press Bureau) and it was high time that in the matter of war we sat at the feet of Germany. She barely had time to weaken her last effect by declaring the German military machine, for all its forty years' perfection, to be the greatest imposture in history, before the Duchess of Ross was announced.

"Odious painted creature. And always late!" Lady Maitland whispered to me, as she hurried forward with both hands outstretched.

"You look giddy," Yolande murmured.

"And what do you think of England after a year of war?" Eleanor Ross cried over her shoulder, as we went down to dinner.

2

If Lady Maitland had invited a full account of my internment and had then scampered away without waiting to hear it, I was not let off so easily by either of my neighbours at dinner. For the first three courses I told my tale to the Duchess of Ross, who spent the second three handing it on to the right, while I turned like an automaton and repeated my recitation to Lady Pentyre. As I might have foreseen, knowing their craving to be ahead of the world with any new thing, I was instantly committed to lunching with both (because each knew so many people who would be simply dying to meet me and hear all about it); and, if I bore my cross with resignation, it was because I knew that I was relieving someone else (he proved to be a submarine commander who had recently been awarded the Victoria Cross)—and that I should be relieved in my turn when a greater novelty presented itself—(after three days an American *Lusitania* survivor came to my rescue).

I was beginning to get used to the noise and strangeness

and to recover from my first bewilderment, when Lady Maitland rustled to her feet, and I was left at the mercy of a political argument carried on between my host and Grayle across my body. So far as I remembered, it concerned the likelihood of compulsory service, and I was only interested to find Grayle, the most lawless man of my acquaintance, pleading for more discipline, while a high-and-dry Tory like Maitland defended Ministers whom he had styled thieves and common sharpers at the time of the 1909 Budget and the Marconi enquiry. I had almost forgotten my poor little host's genius for picking up the hastier opinions and less profound catchwords of the uninformed. George caught my eye and winked, as Maitland thumped the table impressively, tugged at his moustache and talked—with a slightly shocked intonation—of "the brain and sinew of the Government, my dear Grayle." Young Pentyre, as surprise relaxed into boredom, moved next to me and began a rival conversation.

"Who's the patriotic gentleman?" he whispered. "And why's he so excited about the jolly old Government?"

"He's got a bee in his bonnet," George explained, "because he fancies he brought down the old Liberal lot and can't make out why he's not been given a job in the Coalition."

"But who is he?" Pentyre persisted.

As I had known Grayle longer than anyone present, I took it upon myself to answer.

We had first met nearly forty years ago as boys at Eton, soon drawing together in a common recognition, keenly felt and resented, that we were poorer than our fellows. My father had no business to send me there at all, but every male Stornaway always had gone to Eton, whether he could afford it or not. Grayle, the only son of a hard-drinking Gloucestershire squire, who used to beat him unmercifully, was sent to school when he grew strong enough to resist parental castigation, with an idea, I suppose, that others by force of numbers would be able to continue the beatings. We worked our way up the

school together, until Grayle was withdrawn in consequence of some trouble with a tradesman's daughter in Slough, and met again at Trinity, when the scandal was half forgotten. There I remained four years and Grayle four weeks. If I ever heard the full story of his subsequent, final, cataclysmic quarrel with his father (they were separated, I know, by the stud-groom and a couple of strappers), I have forgotten the details; the result of the quarrel was that Vincent disappeared, and the next time that I saw him was several years later in New York. I had gone up there from Washington and ran unexpectedly into Grayle's arms on Fifth Avenue; he was accompanied by another Trinity man of my year—Guy Bannerman, a brilliant, shiftless Rabelaisian, whom Grayle with his startling streak of prodigal generosity had taken in hand and was prepared (as he consistently proved) to keep afloat. I remember how one of the loudest voices in the world suddenly silenced the drone of traffic by thundering,

"It's the great anomaly of modern civilisation. What are you going to do with them? Theoretically they're your equal fellow-citizens, but they don't vote, they daren't enter a white man's hotel. I can't remember for the moment whether they're actually increasing in numbers——"

Then I knew, even without sight of the square-faced, bull-necked man with the familiar grey eyes, dusty hair and capacious loose-lipped mouth, that Guy Bannerman had discovered America and was concerned to solve the negro problem. He was on his way to Klondike, where he heard that gold had been found, and he swore me impressively to secrecy.

"Half New York knows about it already," I had to warn him.

"How did they hear?" he roared.

"You've just told them."

The three of us lunched together, and I found that Grayle, too, was bound for the gold-fields. Their methods of approach were notably different, for, while Guy Banner-

man informed New York City that any fool could dig for gold and I retorted that every fool would, Grayle was compiling an exhaustive list of everything that a gold-digger could need or be drugged into thinking he needed.

"One wants a pick and shovel, I suppose," Guy ventured, "and—and a pannikin." His conception of gold-digging impressed me as being literary.

"And food, drink, lights, clothes, covering, cooking-gear, medicine——" Grayle struck in ferociously. "No, we're not going to discover the North West Passage, but we're going to make these swine squeal—and the more squeals we knock out of them the better I shall be pleased. Tools, blankets—or rather, sleeping-bags. Tents. Tobacco. Mustn't forget tobacco. Bags for the gold. I suppose, if you've had a good day, you sleep with a revolver under your pillow; *and* stand drinks all round, which involves the worst obtainable Californian gooseberry. I'm going to supply the outfit, and they're going to dig the gold. Exploit, or be exploited. Care to come in with us, Stornaway? Anything you like to put up, you know. . . ."

He could not persuade me to come and help him exploit, nor could he save Bannerman from being exploited, but the enterprise as he saw and planned it was a giant success even in the history of gold-rushes. I believe Aylmer Lancing supplied the capital; Grayle reached Klondike a week after the rush had begun and only came east when it was starkly not worth his while to be left with a month's stores on his hands; then the insalubrious shanty known as "Grayle's Hotel" was sold by private treaty, the stock-in-trade was put up to auction on a rising market and he returned to square his accounts with Lancing in New York.

However much money he made, I dare swear that he returned with even more experience. For many months many thousands of the world's choicest blackguards had slept between his blankets, worked with his tools, eaten his food and sheltered beneath his roofs. Raving with his Californian gooseberry champagne, a Pittsburg smelter had emptied one of his six-shooters into the scattering head of

his partner; Grayle sold the coffin and subsequently a coil of rope. He supplied jewellery and dresses to the women whom he had induced to follow the camp; he peddled concertinas to the musically-minded. Twice the store was looted, after a good day and a full dinner, which the looting party instinctively felt to have been insufficiently full. The first time he convened a public meeting and asked if it was in the common interest to make him close down; the second time he began to pack and only unpacked when the leader had been unobtrusively lynched. As a study in contrasts, Guy Bannerman spent three months carrying the gold south and bringing back stores; then he tired of the only work for which he was fit, pocketed his share of the profits and started digging. The profits were coaxed out of him by a woman whom he set himself to reclaim—without noticeable success—and, whereas the gold began to peter out within a month of Grayle's departure, Bannerman stayed on until his last dollar had passed to the new proprietor of "Grayle's Hotel."

I met both adventurers in Venezuela, which they had to leave before their scheduled time, and again at Colon. Then I returned to England and got myself elected to the House of Commons for the Southdown division of Sussex; I did not see Grayle again until the 1900 election brought him into the House, with Guy Bannerman faithfully running the election and later acting as secretary, shadow, press-cutting agency, collector of statistics, fact-finder and general parliamentary devil. Then he went out to South Africa for the second half of the war.

Having seen the man undisguised in two continents, I have always been a little surprised to find how little he was known here; he can be a very entertaining ruffian, causing the usually censorious to apologise and say "a blackguard, but at least he's not a hypocrite, you know;" on the other hand, through the rose-tinted spectacles of middle-age I seem to look back on a House of Commons which would not have tolerated him; perhaps we are more indulgent nowadays, perhaps no one took the trouble to

compile a dossier, perhaps each man felt that his own turn might come next.

Be that as it may, Grayle succeeded in entering a House that neither liked nor trusted him. Fishing in troubled waters for twelve years, he picked up a knowledge of his colleagues, even if he landed no fish; speculation in countries too enterprising to be critical had made him rich enough to pay other people's debts and occasionally to compensate lost honour on behalf of some rising politician with a reputation to preserve, but he never came into the open until the Marconi enquiry, when I discovered by the savagery of his attacks on the Government that he was now a newspaper proprietor. The war gave him his opportunity, and, according to the far from impartial statement of Bertrand Oakleigh, who liked an actionable story for its own sake, Grayle was one of the leaders in organising the Unionist attack on the Liberal Government in 1915.

All this and more I contrived to convey to Pentyre before Grayle had finished his cigar and signified his willingness to come upstairs.

We were hardly inside the drawing-room before he had limped briskly to the sofa where the young bride who had been his neighbour at dinner was seated; she smiled easily, ungratified but obviously conscious of his admiration, and in a moment they were splashing to the waist in vivacious badinage. I sought out my niece and tried to secure ten minutes' quiet discussion of my own affairs.

In one of the first letters to reach me in my internment camp Yolande cautiously prepared me for bad news; on the next page she announced young Deryk Lancing's death; a week later I heard—in my loose-box and amid a smell of straw and whitewash—that the whole estate of some twenty odd millions had passed to me. I had known old Sir Aylmer Lancing, the boy's father, ever since I was transferred from Vienna to Washington, when he was in the fulness of his powers and Deryk was unborn. Indeed, he had hitched me out of the Diplomatic and given me a start with one of his own firms of contractors in South

America, and there I had made enough money to retire to affluence when my health broke down in Panama. I had seen him, too, regularly and intimately for fifteen years after his stroke; indeed, I had induced my brother to sell him Ripley Court and I spent so much of my time there that it was sometimes hard to believe that the great, gaunt house had ever changed hands. Deryk I had known since he was a boy of eight or nine, brilliant and precocious, neurotic, impatient and inconsiderate, but winning and lovable with it all and filled with a blaze of promise. He had succeeded to the title and estate less than twelve months before he was killed; he had just become engaged rather romantically to a girl with whom he had long been in love; and it was on the day when he had been shewing her the house which I persuaded him to buy and which was waiting for them both that he had fallen from the roof and been picked up dead and hideously broken. . . .

I looked round the room, through the rich gleam of Lady Maitland's red lacquer, at Grayle, sitting with one leg permanently stiff in front of him, Charles Maitland, already twice wounded, Pentyre in his Guards uniform, waiting to go out, and my eyes came to rest on Yolande's black dress.

"You would have thought the war had done enough damage without any extras of that kind," I said.

"What are you going to do with all the money?" she asked wonderingly.

"I want time to think, Yolande," I said. "I feel a little bit dazed. It's so much the same—and yet so different. I know this room so well, Lady Maitland's the same fat, voluble, outrageous, delightful creature that she always was,—and yet I seemed to have dipped into another world. . . ."

We were still talking of ourselves and the family when a maid entered to say that a Mr. Jellaby wished to speak to Colonel Grayle on the telephone. I smiled in easy triumph as Grayle scrambled to his feet, for I have so often found Mr. Jellaby wishing to speak to me on the telephone,

and poor Jellaby with tears in his voice has begged me to help keep a house or stand in readiness for a division or relieve guard after an all-night sitting.

"If there's a division, I shall take you," Grayle threatened in retaliation for my smile, as he leaned down for his stick. "One of these Labour swine making trouble, I expect. We've all got to back the Government as long as it *is* the Government."

It was a good guess, for he returned a moment later and dragged me to my feet with the announcement that Grimthorpe, the A.S.E. man, was threatening to divide the House unless the Prime Minister gave an assurance that the National Registration Bill would never be made the basis of a system of conscription.

"Infernal nuisance, but we shall have to go," he said. "You've got to start your duties some time, Stornaway, and you may as well keep me company and start them to-night. Only a formality, you know. Half the Cabinet's sworn *not* to graft conscription on to the Bill, and the other half's sworn it will. Beauty of coalition government!"

More from a desire to see what the House looked like than from any wish to support Grayle, I allowed myself to be taken away. As I shook hands with Lady Maitland, he stumped back to his sofa and roundly told the young bride that he proposed to come and call on her.

"Haven't half finished our conversation," he said in a tone of authority, "so if you'll tell me your address——"

I chose to think that her manner hardened, as though she felt that Grayle was taking her for granted too much.

"I'm hardly ever at home," she answered. "My Belgian refugee work——"

"Free in the evenings," he interrupted jerkily. "*My* only time for calling."

She hesitated and, as I thought, sank her voice slightly, putting herself on the defensive.

"You'd only be bored, you know," she warned him. "It

isn't an ordinary house, and you won't meet ordinary people."

"Coming to see *you*," Grayle answered.

"You clearly aren't wanted, Grayle," I said, taking him by the arm. "If you insist on dragging me to the House, let's start at once."

He shook free of my hand and turned to her, as though he were delivering an ultimatum.

"You don't want me to come?" he demanded.

"You won't be amused," she answered, this time in unmistakable distress.

"Where do you live?" he asked relentlessly.

"In Westminster." I was rather shocked by the way in which she allowed him to bully her. "A house called 'The Sanctuary,' on the Embankment, just by the Tate Gallery."

He repeated the name as we walked downstairs and whistled unsuccessfully for a taxi. On the steps I told him again that he had been making a nuisance of himself, for she was probably living in some modest boarding-house. Grayle would only murmur irrelevantly that she was a devilish pretty girl, an opinion evidently shared by George Oakleigh and the Maitland boys, who had surrounded her before Grayle was out of the room. I cannot remember that her looks left any impression on me at this meeting.

"'The Sanctuary'," he murmured for the third time, as we set off on foot for the House. "Didn't happen to hear what her name was, did you? Never bother about names myself."

"It would be inartistic," I said.

We walked through Eaton Square in silence and along Buckingham Gate and Birdcage Walk to Parliament Square. As we aproached the Palmerston monument, Grayle touched my arm, pointed ahead and quickened his limping pace; an open-air meeting of two soldiers, nine loafers and one woman was being addressed by a shabbily-garbed young man who seemed to be on the worst possible terms with

his audience; Grayle, who has the nose of a schoolboy or a terrier for any kind of fight, clearly felt that this, like the war, was too good to miss. What went before, I have, of course, no means of judging, but such fragments of vituperation as reached me suggested the wonder why a man, who cared nothing for his hearers, troubled to harangue an exasperated group, which was quite unconvinced by his reasoning. The speaker kept his temper; his hearers had lost theirs from the outset, I should imagine, and this possibly amused him and justified the effort.

"Go aht and fight yourself," cried one of the soldiers truculently, "before yer snacks at the men that 'ave been out there."

"I should not der-ream of fighting," the lecturer answered with practised and very clear enunciation.

"Precious sight too careful of yer dirty skin!"

The lecturer laughed with maddening calm.

"I value my life," he conceded, "but I happen to be brave enough to value my soul more. I do not choose to be the deluded instrument of Junkers here or elsewhere, and, had anyone thought you worth educating, you would not choose it either. My fine fellow, you were before the war —what? A coal-heaver? But you had no quarrel with the coal-heavers of Germany, until your Junkers told you to fight; you will again have no quarrel when your Junkers tell you to stop fighting. I was a medical student once, I had no quarrel with the medical students of other nations, nor can I make a quarrel when a Junker tells me to hate, to be red and angry—if you could see how red and angry you look now!—to stab and shoot and slash. If I have to kill, let me kill a Junker, who cannot maintain the peace of the world." He sank his voice with artistic pretence of talking to himself. "But I was educated, I have thought, I am not a dog to be whistled to heel or incited to fight other dogs."

In the pause that followed Grayle put his lips to my ear and whispered behind his hand.

"Get those two Tommies away," he begged. "Dust this

fellow's jacket for him, but can't do it in uniform with men about."

I gripped his arm firmly and tried to drag him away. The war seemed to have brought all Grayle's latent ferocity to the surface.

"Don't be a fool!" I whispered.

"Not going to let a damned German agent talk sedition in my hearing!" he cried.

Even as he spoke, the decision was taken out of our hands. The soldier, rightly or wrongly described as a coal-heaver, stepped forward and called upon the lecturer to "take that back, will you?" The lecturer smiled, folded his arms and said nothing, quietly waiting for the interruption to subside.

"Take that back!" repeated the soldier, with a new note of menace in his voice, and, when there was no answer, dealt a swinging open-handed blow to the lecturer's face.

His victim staggered, recovered his balance and stood with lips tightly compressed and a print of angry scarlet on his cheek. One of the women had screamed; two of the loafers cried, after deliberation, "Serve him right!"

"When opposed to truth," the lecturer continued, when he had satisfied himself that no second blow was coming, "violence is as ineffectual in the street as on the battlefield. You do not stifle truth by sending a man to Siberia, as I've seen men sent, though you may remove an undesirable prefect of police, as I have *seen* one removed, sky-high in Kiev, because—well, the truth was not in him. Nor is there truth in you; there can be no truth in dogs who feed on bones flung from the table, dogs who rise up raw from their beating and give their lives to protect their masters."

This time there was no invitation to retract. The same soldier again stepped quickly forward, threw his arm across his chest and flung the full weight of his body into a sweeping backhander. The lecturer was lifted off his feet and carried a yard back, where he struck the railings and fell in an invertebrate mass with one leg curled under him. The

onlookers craned forward uneasily, glanced at one another and began to separate in silence, the more quickly when Grayle limped up and confronted the avenging soldier.

"Clear out of this!" he ordered abruptly.

"'E insulted the uniform, sir," came the husky justification compounded of alcohol, fear and regard for Grayle's red band and tabs.

"I know all about that. Clear out and take your friends with you. He's not dead," he added a moment later, when we were alone, contemptuously exploring the body with his toe. "I don't suppose he's even badly hurt. I propose to leave him here and tell one of the Bobbies at the House——"

There was a groan as the toe glided on to an injured part. I asked the man where he was hurt, and at sound of my voice he opened his eyes, looked round for a moment and closed them again. I was as yet far from used to the dim light from the shrouded street-lamps and could only see that he looked a man between twenty and thirty, shockingly thin of body, with fair hair, dark blue eyes and a narrow face with high cheek bones. His air and costume were generally threadbare. More from policy than compassion Grayle relented somewhat.

"I'll mount guard," he said. "Get hold of a Bobby and a stretcher."

3

To be involved, however innocently, in a street brawl is considerably more characteristic of Vincent Grayle than of myself. I think that he should have discontinued the habit at least when he reached the age of fifty, but I know well that he only regretted his late arrival.

"They keep a stretcher at the House, don't they?" he asked, as he bared his crop of yellow hair to the wind and lit a cigarette in preparation for his vigil by the recumbent agitator. "If not, telephone Cannon Row."

I was starting on my way when I collided with a young man who had joined us unperceived. He was in evening

dress with an overcoat across his arm and a sombre-eyed Saint Bernard at his side.

"Someone hurt?" he enquired, after waving away my apologies. "I thought I heard the word 'stretcher.'"

"It was only a street row," Grayle explained callously. "This fellow thought fit to address an anti-recruiting meeting, and his points weren't very well taken."

The young man wrinkled his forehead, laughed and, after a moment's thought, slipped his arms into the sleeves of his overcoat.

"Didn't Doctor Johnson say that every man had the right to express his opinion and that everyone else had the right to knock him down for it?" he drawled. Then abruptly, "Are you Colonel Grayle, by any chance?"

"I am," Grayle answered with a look of surprise.

"I thought I recognised your voice. I collect voices and I heard you last week when the National Registration Bill was in Committee. Do you think it's possible to arrive at a taxi? I live quite near here and I can take the patient home for treatment."

"But why the deuce should *you* bother about him?" Grayle asked.

The boy smiled to himself and shrugged his shoulders.

"If we cast him off to a hospital, there'll be all sorts of silly questions," he explained. "And I'm a bit of an Ishmaelite myself. What's the extent of the damage?"

The injured man opened his eyes again and reduced his huddled limbs to some sort of order, not without occasional twinges of pain. He seemed nothing but skin and loose bones and might well have fainted from exhaustion rather than injury.

"My left leg's done for," he announced.

The stranger nodded sympathetically.

"Can anyone see a taxi?" he asked. "They've simply disappeared from the streets of London, like Sam Weller's dead donkeys and postboys. Well, you men help him up and give him a hoist on to my shoulders. I'm only a step from here."

At a guess the sprawling figure was some inches taller and at least as heavy as the new-comer, but my suggestion that we should wait for a taxi or send for a stretcher was disregarded.

"Perhaps I'm stronger than I look," he told me; to the injured man he said, "Clasp your hands round my neck; I'll try not to shake you, but it may come a bit painful. And one of you men look after the steering so that I don't tumble off the kerb or get run over. The house is just by the Tate Gallery—a big sort of barn with a lamp over the door—it's called 'The Sanctuary.'"

Grayle started violently and looked at me, but I had appointed myself steersman and was heading for Millbank in the wake of the sombre-eyed Saint Bernard. The young man's looks belied his strength, for he walked fast enough for Grayle to have difficulty in keeping pace, and, as he walked, he told us that the expected division was a false alarm and that the House was up. I hurried along by his side, feeling more and more that the whole evening had passed in a dream and that I should wake up to find myself back in my internment camp. The noise and excitement had tired me into somnolence; the darkened streets added to my feeling of unreality. The dog with a cane and hat in his jaws, one young man with another young man sprawling on his shoulders, Grayle panting on one side and myself guiding the unconvincing procession on the other made up a picture whose reality I myself doubted more than once.

And the house, when we reached it, was a large brick-and-timber warehouse, once the property of a wharfinger, before the Embankment was built, and quite unlike anything that I had expected,—though in keeping with everything that night. I stood waiting for instructions, for there was a modern annexe, with a second floor. I learned afterwards that Whaley, the Pre-Raphaelite, had used the place as a studio.

"It's only about half furnished at present," our young friend informed us, "and I expect you'll find it very un-

tidy. We've not been married a month yet. The house was a wedding-present."

I had guessed him to be the husband of the young bride whom we had met at dinner and could understand why his wife was unprepared for visitors.

"We won't come in," I said, as we stopped under a wrought-iron lamp by a heavy oak door painted in white gothic characters with the name of the house.

"Oh, you must!" he cried. "I may want help. You just push the door—it isn't locked—and, if there's no light on, you'll find the switches to the right. Don't turn it on, though, till the door's shut, or someone will run me in for signalling to German aircraft."

Grayle at least seemed to need no second invitation, and, when our host said that he might want help, I did not see my way to refuse the first. I confess, too, that I was amused and curious; the boy was attractive, with mobile face, dark hair and big, black eyes; I liked his quick smile and rather mischievous laugh, above all, I respected his good-nature in picking up a total stranger, who, so far as one can justify private acts of violence, had been most justifiably punished.

We passed through the hall into a lofty room with long windows far up the walls above ten feet of oak panelling, rough-cut beams melting into the shadows of the roof and a block-floor half-covered with rugs. On a dais to our right as we entered stood a long refectory table between two rows of heavily carved Spanish oak chairs; at the far end was a grand piano; low book-cases ran round the walls, there were three or four big oil-paintings above the panelling, and arranged in half-circles round the two fires were luxuriously large sofas and arm-chairs. I was a little reminded of a college hall, when I looked at the severe table on this dais, the black-beamed roof and panelled walls; I thought of the perfect club smoking room, when I tried one of the chairs; and the whole room, as I surveyed its warm, bright emptiness from the doorway suggested a stage scene at the rise of the curtain.

"It's rather jolly, isn't it?" said my host, when I expressed my admiration. "The bedrooms are all in the new part, but, when we're not asleep, we shall feed and work and live here. Personally I never want more than one room and, if this one isn't big enough, I should like to know what is. I'm sorry my wife isn't in, she could shew you round so much better; but she's dining out to-night."

He settled the injured man in comfort on a long sofa and went to a telephone by the piano. While he waited for his call, we were invited to help ourselves from a side-table on the dais, where a generous choice of cake, sandwiches, fruit, cold meat, cheese and drinks of many kinds awaited us. He hoped that we should find something to our taste; people were apt to drop in at all hours, he assured us, so it was as well to have something handy. I poured myself out a brandy and soda and accepted one of his cigars. My young friend took for granted much that is not usually taken for granted, but I tried to harmonise with his mood and succeeded better, I think, than Grayle, who walked slowly about the room, staring at the furniture and pictures, but not committing himself to criticism. My cigar was hardly alight when the flame-coloured silk curtain over the door was drawn aside and a girl came in, looked round at us incuriously and cut herself a slice of cake. As she prepared to eat it, she caught sight of the figure on the sofa and walked quickly up to our host, who murmured something and shook his head. Five minutes later the doctor arrived, and, while he began his examination, I announced that I must go home.

"My wife will be back any minute now," our host pleaded, putting a repeater to his ear. "Are you sure you won't stay?"

"Let us come again in day-light," I said. "I'm really rather tired now. I've been travelling a lot lately."

He bowed with smiling courtesy.

"I won't keep you, but please come whenever you feel inclined to. You just push the door, as I explained——"

"Don't you ever lock it?" asked Grayle, breaking silence

for the first time since we had set out from Parliament Square.

The young man's black eyes smiled wonderingly.

"Why should I?" he asked.

"Prevent things being stolen," Grayle answered.

"Nobody's stolen anything yet,—and we've been here a week! But, if anybody *did* steal, it would probably mean that he wanted it more than we did."

"What's your *objection* to locking it?" Grayle pursued.

The boy stood with his hands in his pockets, swaying backwards and forwards from heel to toe and smiling mischievously, with his luminous black eyes upon our faces.

"It seems so inhospitable!" he laughed, "and I love symbols."

"But who d'you keep it open for?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"Your friend, the doctor, his patient, that lady who came in a moment ago. You, if you will come again."

"I shall certainly come again," I said, as we shook hands.

Walking along Millbank, Grayle broke into an unexpected laugh.

"I thought I'd met most kinds of lunacy," he remarked. "Fellow said he was in the House, didn't he? I must look him up in the directory to-morrow and see what their name is. 'The Sanctuary.' I suppose that's a symbol, too."

4

A reputation for honesty is often embarrassing; when coupled with efficiency, it is always disastrous. For five-and-twenty years I have reeled under the name of a "good business man," and this has exposed me to attack by every impulsive woman and woolly-headed man who has wanted something done without quite knowing how to do it, who has wished money collected without quite knowing how to set about it, who has dragged his committee and himself knee-deep into the mire of stagnant insolvency without knowing

whether to go on or to struggle back. Then someone has said, "We must co-opt Mr. Raymond Stornaway."

As the reputation has long ceased to be an honour and is now only a nuisance, I propose to affect no false modesty about it. Before the war I was always being made a governor of some new school or hospital, and my success is to be measured by the fact that I almost invariably got my own way in committee—(if I was not voted into the chair at once, I overwhelmed the chairman until he yielded place)—and as invariably I raised the funds which I had been appointed to find. Perhaps I hoped that, as everyone had comfortably survived my absence for a year, I should be allowed a respite, but on the morrow of this Arabian Night of mine I was to discover that London contained as many voluble, sympathetic and unpractical women as ever, all convinced that they had only to form a committee of their friends, dispense with book-keeping, insert their photographs in the illustrated papers and stretch out both hands to a man who knew a man who had a friend on one of the daily papers.

Lady Maitland rustled in, grey-haired and majestic, as I was finishing breakfast the first morning; the Duchess of Ross starved me into submission before she would let me go down to luncheon; and by night I was duly included in the Committees of the Belgian Relief Fund, the Emergency Hospital Fund and the Prisoners of War Relief Fund. The following day Mountstuart of the Treasury wheedled me into the Deputy Commissionership of the War Charities Control Department, and I found myself after an interval of thirty years once more a Government servant, charged to see that the amateur enthusiasm of Eleanor Ross and her friends did not defraud the public too flagrantly and that a reasonable proportion of the money collected was in fact paid over to the objects for which it had been raised.

Throughout August and the first half of September I set myself to learn my new duties, spending the morning in the St. James' Street Committee rooms and the afternoon at the Eaton Hotel, where my Department had been in-

stalled in a faded coffee-room enlivened by a sardonic portrait of Lord Beaconsfield in Garter robes and made business-like by rickety trestle tables, paste pots and letter trays, internecine telephones and japanned deed-boxes earmarked as His Majesty's property by a white crown and "G.R." It took me several bashful days to grow acclimatised to the epicene life of the office, but I discovered in time and with relief that the expensive young women with the Johnsonian capacity for conversation and tea were every whit as much frightened of me as I of them. The men afforded material for my insatiable interest in my fellow creatures; we had a few journalists, a stockbroker or two, several college tutors, an elderly miscellany which had retired some years before and was returning to active service for the duration of the war, two or three men rejected or invalided out of the army and three or four whose reason for not being in the army was not so obvious—a gathering which was partly patriotic, wholly impecunious and very different from the collection of unfledged naked intelligences which were distributed through the public offices of other days by the Civil Service Commissioners.

When I had subdued Lady Pentyre in the morning and ploughed through the familiar files in the afternoon, I devoted the evening to private business. A year's accumulation of letters made a considerable pile, which was not reduced by the kindly friends who thought it necessary to congratulate me on my return; nor was my leisure increased by those others who invited me to lunch or dinner with a persistency that brooked no refusal. In time, however, I had read myself abreast of the periodical literature produced by the hospitals and schools; in time, too, I began to tackle the Lancing inheritance and paid formal visits to Ripley Court and the house in Pall Mall to see that they were satisfactory to the War Office. So long as the war continued, I was not likely to be faced by poor Deryk Lancing's inability to dispose of the income of the Trust.

A month slipped imperceptibly away before I had got rid of the arrears of work and felt justified in taking on extra

burdens. Then I paid my first visit to the House of Commons and tried in one evening to get the temper of a House which I had left toiling acrimoniously in 1914 with the third presentation of the Home Rule Bill. The Front Benches were pleasantly mingled in late-found amity, there was a solid, unquestioning Ministerial majority, but in place of an official opposition I found a curious collection of cliques not wholly satisfied with all the heroic remedies of the Government and fearful that criticism might be construed as factiousness. I was to find later that, with the abdication of the House of Commons, all control of administration fell gradually into the hands of the Press.

The Smoking Room, which—like the rest of London—moved in a regular cycle of elation and depression, optimism and despair, was in deep gloom my first night. The recruiting-figures were shrinking daily, we could look for no help from America and what Lady Maitland called "that Man Wilson's 'too proud to fight' nonsense." Warsaw had just fallen, and Russian Poland lay at the mercy of the enemy; earlier in the week, too, we had experienced our first Zeppelin raid and, while it was easy to count the casualties and demonstrate the 700,000 to 1 odds against any one of us being killed, we felt that something remained to be done and that these birds of death, however exciting to watch, should not be allowed to fly to and fro at will, hover their destructive hour and depart unscathed.

As I can do nothing with criticism which is afraid to materialise into action, I decided to leave the House early and, being at a loose end, to pay my promised call at "The Sanctuary." The fact that I had let a month go by without discovering my host's name disturbed me little in a house where so much was taken for granted, and I boldly pushed open the door, as I had been bidden, and looked into the long, warm room. By firelight it seemed empty at first; then I heard voices and saw the disabled agitator sitting on a sofa with his leg up, talking to the girl whom I had seen

on my last visit. As I hesitated by the door, she jumped up and made me welcome.

"Leg not right yet, then?" I said, as I joined them by the sofa. "By the way, my name's Raymond Stornaway."

"Mine's Hilda Merryon," said the girl at once.

I had not had much opportunity of observing her before, but I saw now that she was young and slight, with black hair and very pale, regular features. She had in her manner, too, something scornful which I found immediately antagonistic.

"Oh, I shall be here for weeks," said the young agitator, "if they'll keep me. We're tuberculous as a family, and the knee will probably turn out tuberculous. I'm Peter Beresford."

My niece Yolande, who buys all modern poetry that she can find, tells me that I ought to have been certainly the wiser and perhaps the more impressed by this information; and, if I had spent the last year in England instead of abroad, I might very well have read of Beresford's escapades with the police. Various people have from time to time contributed fragments of his biography. I believe that he started as the dreamy and eccentric son of a Lincolnshire family and that on leaving school he had betaken himself to Moscow on a self-conscious literary holiday. Once there, he refused to come back. The sombre, intoxicating magic of Dostoevski had drawn him, Russia laid her spell upon him; and, when funds from home were cut off, he starved and feasted, worked and slumbered for two years, until the woman with whom he was living forsook him. A violent reaction sent him to Cambridge, a strangely experienced and natively rebellious freshman, for he had written poetry and abandoned it, read medicine and abandoned it, mixed in revolutionary society and drifted under a haunting police surveillance which only relaxed when powerful friends urged his reluctant steps homeward.

"No more public meetings for the present, then," I said.

Anyone may call the words fatuous, but they were harmless and not ill-natured. I quote them because of their

effect in lashing Beresford to a passion only describable as insane. I have never met anyone who knew him as a boy, I cannot say whether he was naturally neurotic or whether too early acquaintance with oppression had warped his mind, but I saw a good deal of him between this night and our last meeting and I have consistently felt from the moment of this encounter that he was separated from certifiable madness by a hair's breadth. He had all the suspicion, the sudden fury, the courage and the obstinacy of fanaticism, the whole streaked with morbidity. We talked long that night, and every chapter of his Russian Odyssey ended with the refrain "Alone of the beasts man delights in torturing his fellows;" yet, when he described a meeting in Petersburg being broken up by a charge of Cossacks, I could have sworn that there was gloating in his tale of casualties, as with a man who will pay money to stare at physical deformity. Against this, his hatred of oppression was rooted in a poet's love of beauty. His quarrel with society in peace was that it made man a soul-stunted slave and the countryside an industrial ash-heap, in war that it made him a disembowelled and screaming reproach of the Maker who fashioned him in His image. Beresford had a sense of colour, form and sound which a man will never know unless he be born with it. Again and again it came out in his descriptions. And then I remember his making a sarcastic and grotesquely ineffectual speech to a knot of drunken loafers.

"Do you feel that the sort of thing you were saying the other night does much good?" I persisted, as he glared at me, breathing quickly.

His sudden blaze of anger seemed to dab two spots of scarlet on his shining, prominent cheek-bones.

"For you—*no* good!" he cried. "I told those fools not to fight, I asked them what they were fighting for! *They* didn't know. How should they? But *you* know. Keep the dogs fighting one another, and they won't turn on you. But when your troops come back, the troops that you have

drilled and taught to shoot, when they ask why their companions were killed——"

The girl relaxed the scornful attitude of aloofness, which she had preserved throughout the evening, to touch his arm warningly; he coughed and went back to his cigarette.

I laughed at him, partly because it was good for him and partly to help me keep my own temper.

"That stuff didn't go down the other night, and it won't go down with me. You've been talking quite sensibly so far——" He bowed ironically. "You can't make war without killing people, and there would have been no peace or safety, if we'd stood out. Of course, if you want to see this country or Russia treated as Belgium has been treated——"

He snorted contemptuously and told me, as an eye-witness, that the Belgian atrocities could at their worst always be matched by the Russian atrocities in East Prussia. ("Alone of the beasts man delights in torturing his fellows.") But why strain at the gnat and swallow the camel? The major atrocity was war; and, the greater the war, the greater the atrocity. "The English were not too humane in South Africa. No. And South Africa was child's play, it didn't matter who won. You were less humane still in putting down the Indian Mutiny, where you were fighting for our lives. Germany is fighting for her life, she must fight how she can. A screen of women and children before the advancing armies? One husbands one's troops. The Zeppelin attacks? One always likes to undermine civilian moral, to make the whimperers at home yelp for peace on one's own terms—(and are not you high-minded English warring on civilians—women and children, too—by blockading Germany?). This is a war of nations with all the nations' human and material resources poured into the scale. If you want to fight, fight to *win!* Sink your hospital ships! They will have to be replaced, and fewer troops, less food, less ammunition will be carried in consequence."

He threw himself back exhausted and gave way to a

fit of coughing which threatened to tear him in pieces. I looked at my watch and got up to go.

"You should have preached this before the war," I suggested.

"It will be before the next war," he gasped. "And war there will be! I'm sick of this 'war-to-end-war' claptrap! That's been thought in every war, it was thought when Europe was leagued against Napoleon, as it is now leagued against the Kaiser! There will be war until the fools I addressed that night, those dogs who fight for the masters that betray them, turn and tear their masters limb from limb. Yes. If they don't do that before the world is ripe for another vintage, if they wait till present memories have faded and another generation of old men sits in power to send young men to their death——"

His pity again became merged in imaginative blood-lust until he seemed to revel in the horror of his own description. Science was to be applied without mercy or discrimination. When the maximum of destruction had been effected in the field, the war would be carried behind the lines to those who made its continuance possible. There would be no quarter for prisoners, who might escape, nor for the wounded, who might recover and fight again. The nurses and doctors who dragged the wounded back to life and patched them into the semblance of men were making new soldiers; it was not convenient that the enemy should be presented with new soldiers, so the war must be continued against these nurses and doctors. And against the countrymen, who raised food for the troops, and the artificers, who supplied them with arms, and the women, who came to take men's places on the farm and in the workshop, and the old men, who lent money to buy more guns and shells, and the young boys, who day by day drew nearer to the age when they, too, would be soldiers, and the last woman in the country, who, if she did nothing else, could bear a child to the last man. . . .

Beresford's voice rose until it broke, and his words poured out more and more quickly. The fellow had the

impressiveness which is born of conviction, and the girl by his side no longer attempted to restrain him, but a sound unheard by me stopped him abruptly, and he glanced over his shoulder with quick apprehension, as the door opened and closed. It was not the glance that I associate with an easy conscience, and I was suddenly sorry for the man. A moment later the hunted look left his face, as the flame-coloured curtain was drawn aside, and my host appeared in sight. There was the same whimsical smile in his big, black eyes that I had seen when we met before—mischievous, kindly, and baffling. He threw his hat into a chair and gave his cane to the Saint Bernard to carry; as he came into the room I was struck by the lightness and grace of his movements. The atmosphere cleared of its electricity.

"Only a small party to-night," he murmured.

The girl on the sofa looked up quickly.

"I'm here," she said, "and Mr. Beresford and——" She hesitated and blushed to find that she had forgotten my name.

"Raymond Stornaway," I supplemented. "You said I might come again."

He turned and grasped my hand.

"I've heard our friend George Oakleigh speak about you!" he cried. "I didn't know, the other night, that it was you. Haven't you just been released from Austria? My wife said something. . . . They're a funny people, the Austrians; there's no pleasing them. Now, when they get hold of *you*, they simply won't let you go, but the last time I was in the country—officially—they escorted me over the frontier and hinted that they'd put a bullet in me, if I ever came back. And all because of a regrettable little disturbance in Vienna, when an Austrian officer said things about my father and myself which I thought—and think still—a gentleman does not say."

As I looked at the animated, thin face, I was trying hard to remember where I had seen it before. At the mention of Vienna I saw again an open-fronted café on the Ring-

Strasse with white-aproned waiters bustling, gesticulating and shouting round a swaying mass of combatants; in the heart of the struggle I saw a thin-faced, black-haired boy fighting like a tiger; one arm hung limp and helpless by his side or flapped horribly with the movements of his body, and his face was streaming with blood. I saw his companion bring down the lamp with a blow from a chair, I remember how infinitely more alarming and suggestive the cries, the groans and general tumult of the fight became in the darkness. It was no affair of mine, however, and I was far down the Ring-Strasse when the police cut their way into the mêlée with drawn swords.

"I was in the café at the time," I told him. "You were there with Jack Summertown. I'm surprised that either of you got out alive."

"You were there?" he echoed with a burst of boyish laughter. "It was a great night! I've still got some of the marks! I wondered who you were. . . . Of course, we've got scores of friends in common. You know Bertrand Oakleigh in the House? Well, he lives here. The place in Princes Gardens is being used as a hospital, so George has a room at his Club and the old man stays with us. He gave us the house—he's always been astonishingly generous to me—but of course I couldn't accept it like *that*. I only let him give it to me on condition that I was allowed to share it with others. Perhaps *now* my symbolism——"

He broke off with a laugh and asked whether the others had looked after me well.

"I'm sorry my wife's not here," he said. "Let me see, she wasn't in the last time, either; the fact is, Colonel Grayle telephoned to say that he'd been given a box for some theatre and would we dine with him and go on? I'd already promised to dine at the House and I don't go to the play much, anyway, but she thought she'd like to go, and she hasn't come in yet. To-night you've *got* to wait."

It was half-past eleven, and I held out my watch to him, shaking my head.

"Look at the time," I said.

He took out the repeater that I had seen before and set it striking.

"I set mine by Big Ben this evening," I told him.

"Ah, but I can't see it. I—haven't the use of my eyes, you know. If you feel you must go, I will only remind you that the door will be open next time. I've got any amount to talk to you about, and my wife will be most frightfully sorry to have missed you again. I rather gathered that you and Grayle and she had been dining in the same house that night, but you were at different ends of the table, and she didn't hear your name."

"I don't yet know yours," I said.

"David O'Rane," he answered. "There's no particular reason why you should, unless George has ever talked to you about me. Now, will you swear—on your honour—that you'll come again? And it must be before I go away. Good-night!"

CHAPTER TWO

THE OPEN DOOR

"I was a baby when my mother died
And father died and left me in the street.
I starved there, God knows how, a year or two
On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds and stalks,
Refuse and rubbish. . . .
But, mind you, when a boy starves in the streets
Eight years together, as my fortune was,
Watching folk's faces to know who will fling
The bit of half-stripped grape-bunch he desires,
And who will curse and kick him for his pains,—
Which gentleman processional and fine,
Holding a candle to the Sacrament,
Will wink and let him lift a plate and catch
The droppings of the wax to sell again,
Or holla for the Eight and have him whipped,—
How say I?—nay, which dog bites, which lets drop
His bone from the heap of offal in the street,—
Why, soul and sense of him grow sharp alike,
He learns the look of things, and none the less
For admonition from the hunger-pinch."

ROBERT BROWNING: *Fra Lippo Lippi.*

I

It was not until I had introduced some little organisation into my work that I had opportunity or justification for seeing my friends. I have reached an age when I like to go early to bed between two long days of work; I never ceased to wonder, therefore, at the nervous vitality of some of the people whom I was meeting; London was fuller than I had ever known it, the customary autumn exodus had ended with the war; and, what with a few hundred officers home on leave and athirst for amusement, what with a few thousand girls working in hospitals, canteens and Government offices, anyone who

wanted distraction had not to look long for it. The restlessness which seized London every summer before the war seemed to have increased and become permanent, with an astounding new licence which I found hard to understand. I suppose the war broke down most of the old social conventions, but I sometimes wondered in the early days whether there was anything which the strictly brought up and closely chaperoned young girl of other days was now *not* allowed to do. . . .

Young O'Rane carried me off to my first war party. After I had looked for him unsuccessfully for some weeks, we had been dining at the House and talking business and school politics, for the Governors of Melton School had lately co-opted me in place of Aylmer Lancing, and I had heard from George that O'Rane was temporarily on the staff there. At ten o'clock he told me that he was due home for a house-warming and plunged into a description of his domestic life with all the eagerness of a child—which is what he was—shewing a new toy. Old Bertrand Oakleigh had given them the house as a wedding present; ever since his illness at the outbreak of war (no one was allowed to call it a stroke) the old man had needed some little attention; what easier than to set a couple of rooms aside for him? And the place was so big that you could give a shakedown to "most anyone"—and a meal. It was what O'Rane had always wanted to do—as in the Middle Ages (rather vaguely). . . . I should hardly *believe* some of the people he'd had there even in five weeks. . . . People were such fun; Beresford, for instance . . . full of good stuff, full of white-hot idealism which only needed to be directed. "And he's fallen in love with my wife, so she's gently taming him."

He threw out his sentences with jerky exuberance, passionately serious at one moment and laughing at himself and me the next.

And that girl I had met, Hilda Merryon. . . . A little throb of anger came into O'Rane's voice; she had led a most awful life for about three years; some brute had

victimised her, and her sanctimonious devil of a father had turned her out of the house. . . . Now she was a new woman, though years must pass before she overcame her bitterness and hatred towards the world, and, when he went back to Melton, she was coming as a sort of secretary. . . .

We had reached the house, and he threw open the door and stood aside to let me in.

"I hardly felt this was a normal household when I was here before," I said.

In the light of the hall I could see his black eyes gleaming with laughter.

"You should hear old Oakleigh!" he suggested. "'It's a phase, my dear boy. You'll grow out of it. You see the devil of a lot of strange things, if you live to be as old as I am.'" He paused to laugh at his own exquisite mimicry of Bertrand's disillusionised, pontifical manner and gruff, disparaging voice. "Well, *he* wouldn't eat a twelve-course dinner with a starving man opposite him. . . . It makes life so much easier, if nobody thinks you're quite sane. Won't you go in?"

"Does your wife enter into the spirit of it?" I asked, as I looked at the silk curtains bellying away from the white walls.

He evaded the direct question almost apologetically.

"It's a big change after the life she led before the war," he conceded, "but then the war itself is a big change."

He had mentioned a party, but I was hardly prepared for the army of occupation which I found in the library. Every chair at the long table was filled, and the guests had overflowed and scattered throughout the room, bearing their plates and tumblers with them. Mrs. O'Rane jumped up from her place between Beresford and Deganway, making me welcome and apologising for having missed me before.

"This is such an irregular ménage," she exclaimed in a clear, high voice that dominated the clear, high voices around her. "David's at the House so much, and I spend

my days serving out clothes to Belgian refugees, or finding them houses and work, or getting up concerts and things to raise money for them, but *somebody's* sure to be at home at *some* hour of the night. This is our house-warming, and of course David forgot all about it." She twisted her arms round her husband's neck and kissed him with an ecstasy that told me stabbingly of something that had been left out of my life, "Admit you did, sweetheart, or you won't get any supper."

"*I* remembered! I invited Mr. Stornaway," he protested. "And you're going to look after him while I strum. You seem to have got some people here, Sonia. And there's a sort of hint that some of them have been smoking."

The crowd, the heat, the babble of voices and the fog of tobacco smoke robbed me of resistance and individuality. Before I had been three minutes in the room, I was eating a meal which I did not need, drinking hock-cup which I knew disagreed with me and trying to carry on two conversations and at the same time to see who was already there and who was arriving. Lady Maitland introduced me volubly to a watchful-eyed, supercilious boy whose first play, she assured me, had taken London by storm. Had I seen it? If not, I must go at once; and she refreshed her memory of its name by reference to the author. When he escaped in bored embarrassment from his own biography, she explained loudly a second time that *that* was Eric Lane, the great coming dramatist, and confided as loudly that he was desperately in love with Babs, little Babs Neave, Barbara Neave, Lady Barbara Neave—it was no use my pretending that I didn't know her—and that Crawleigh was at his wits' end, because it was quite out of the question for them to marry, but Babs was such an extraordinary girl that, if you opposed her, you might simply drive her into his arms. . . . Lady Maitland shook her vigorous grey head with an air of concern and at once asked me to meet "both the silly children" at luncheon, because it would interest me. . . .

Before the end of supper I was beginning to get my

bearings and to resolve the unassimilated party into its elements. O'Rane was at the piano, surrounded by George Oakleigh, two shy and hero-worshipping pupils from Melton, Miss Hilda Merryon—still aloof and implacable—and Beresford. In the middle of the room I deduced from Sir Roger Dainton's presence a purely family gathering of Mrs. O'Rane's relations; their tongues were as busy as their eyes, and they looked slightly bewildered—as well they might—and a trifle disapproving.

On the dais Mrs. O'Rane ruled supreme. Even without the explanation which George strolled across to drawl into my ear, I placed her by her surroundings as belonging to a society with which I was very familiar before the war. Lady Sally Farwell sat on one side of her, giving an excellent and somewhat ill-natured imitation of Lady Barbara Neave, who with young Eric Lane was hardly out of earshot. Mr. Evelyn Staines, the romantic hero of half a hundred musical comedies at the Regency, sat on the other, looking out of humour, surprisingly unkempt and unexpectedly old. There was a youthful claque of young officers, two or three actresses, whose appearance the illustrated papers had made known to me, and a sprinkling of middle-aged nondescripts. Before the war I used to organise a good many charity bazaars, charity balls and charity matinées; and Mrs. O'Rane's troupe was always much in evidence. She has since told me that she and Sally Farwell appeared in three duologues and two oriental ballets on my behalf, though I am ashamed to say that my neglect of details left me ignorant of my indebtedness.

There were a dozen smaller groups, thrust into corners or wedged between the heavier furniture. I threaded my way in and out with a word here and a bow there, blinded by the smoke and deafened by the noise. All seemed to be enjoying themselves, however, and I was reasonably amused and interested. From time to time, when O'Rane began to sing or whistle to his own accompaniment, there was a rippling hush; from time to time, again, he would break off with a sudden laugh and plunge into dance music,

whereat most of us flattened ourselves against the walls, while Mrs. O'Rane and Mr. Evelyn Staines gave an exhibition of highly technical stage-dancing.

"I don't quite fit your uncle Bertrand into this," I observed to George, when we found ourselves out of harm's way on the dais.

"He looked in for a moment to offer Raney his blessing and a cheque. Fortunately he can't hear much from his end of the house," was the answer.

Mrs. O'Rane ended a perilous series of movements with a more perilous leap on to her partner's shoulder and was borne breathless and triumphant to the table for hock-cup.

"George, are we shocking Mr. Stornaway?" she asked across me. "I'm so sick of the war!"

She jumped down and looked at me, breathing quickly through parted lips. Her dress was daring, and at this, my first unhurried sight of her at close quarters, I was as much fascinated as a man of my age had any right to be. The face was soft, appealing and warm, with long-lashed brown eyes, flushed cheeks like ripe apricots and a wistful mouth that drooped at the corners, when she was disappointed, and pouted over-quickly when she did not at once get what she wanted. It was a wilful, impatient little face, exacting and rather obstinate, without very much depth of character, but amazingly mobile and young, capable of a child's ecstatic abandonment to happiness and of a melting tenderness when she looked at her husband's unseeing eyes and whimsical, self-protective smile.

"In some ways it's extraordinarily like some of his omnium-gatherum parties at Oxford, Sonia," murmured George, as the tireless fingers at the piano passed from waltz to march and from march to Scandinavian boating-song half as old as time.

Mrs. O'Rane's big eyes swam.

"As like as we can make it," she whispered tremulously; and I was conscious of a new fascination. Though I have never seen a woman or man more perfectly put

together, the head on the neck, the neck on the shoulders, the hands on the wrists or the wrists on the arms, there was something skin-deep and mechanical in her beauty—not necessarily reaching to the heart—until that moment.

The softness passed as suddenly as it had come, and she awoke to a sense of her duties as hostess.

"I want to introduce you to my mother, Lady Dainton," she told me.

Under cover of the presentation she escaped and in another moment was darting with the movement of a dragon-fly in search of a partner for the savage Hawaiian dance which her husband had begun to play. This in turn she abandoned to give extravagant welcome to Sir Adolphus Erskine and to thank him for a string of pearls which she held out jubilantly for his admiring inspection.

My next half-hour was more varied and less pleasant. I was introduced to Lady Dainton, who claimed acquaintance with my brother and insisted that we had met at one of Aylmer Lancing's parties at Ripley Court; I was introduced to her daughter-in-law, who had lately lost her husband and now engaged me in a sullen debate on compulsory service with a view, so far as I could follow the poor creature's distraught reasoning, to securing that as many other women as possible should lose their husbands. I exchanged a few words with Roger Dainton about the state of parties in the House and, as I fancied that I had exhausted the family, found myself confronted once more by Lady Dainton, who led me into a corner, enquired how long I had known O'Rane and begged me to use whatever influence I possessed to bring this folly to an end. Since my first sight of her I had watched a storm-cloud of disapproval banking up, but I could not imagine why its force should be expended on me.

"I'm not narrow-minded, don't you know?" she informed me with majestic uncontradictability, "but this is the first time I've seen Sonia since she was married, and this—this bear-garden is what I find."

There was no disputing the definition, but its application

was limited, for she flung out her arm, until I feared it would leave its socket, in the direction of an arm-chair where Beresford, shabbier than ever by contrast with the rather rich clothes around him, was holding forth with combative resonance on the hypocrisy of our fighting for the free development of the smaller nationalities while we held our Indian Empire in unrepresentative thraldom.

"It's not what Sonia's accustomed to, it's not what she has a right to expect!" exclaimed Lady Dainton with rising indignation. "That—that *creature* has been mocking the people who've gone out and given their lives for their country, when half of us in the room are in mourning. As for the woman——"

"I really don't feel *I* can interfere," I interrupted diffidently.

She sighed with an attempt at resignation.

"I didn't know how well you knew David," she said. "Of course, he's a delightful, gallant, generous soul—nobody's fonder of him than I am—, but he's so terribly impulsive, don't you know? I really hoped that, when Sonia consented to marry him, she would—well—*tame* him a little. Dear David *will* pretend that everybody's like everybody else; well, I don't suppose either of us is a snob, Mr. Stornaway, but there *are* distinctions, don't you know? We should be called old-fashioned, if we *said* anything, but some of the people here to-night—of course, Sonia's a wonderful actress, much cleverer than half the professionals you see, so she's got into rather a theatrical set—I suppose that's the modern spirit; Eleanor Ross had a woman lunching with her to-day who six months ago—well, she wouldn't have dared. . . . But when it comes to turning a private house into a sort of mission-room. . . . One can carry democracy to excess, don't you know?"

The voice was rising again, and Mrs. O'Rane danced to my side and snatched me away on the plea that Lady Maitland wanted to fix a day for my meeting with Barbara Neave.

"Was darling mother being tiresome?" she asked sympathetically. "The casual-ward stunt, I suppose?"

"What do you feel about it yourself?" I asked her.

"About David's lame ducks? Oh, he has his friends, and I have mine, and it's no one else's business." She looked round the crowded room and then seemed to decide that she had been too brusque. "I don't know—yet, whether it will answer," she went on uncertainly. "David's always been a freak about money, he'd always give anything to anybody. Now he says that he'd be dishonoured, if he took with one hand and refused with the other. . . . He's rather absurd, poor darling, because he wouldn't need to take anything from anybody, if he hadn't been so frightfully smashed up in the war. And if I don't mind. . . . It's really rather fun, however mad it may seen. We've all of us gone mad since the war. Except David. You didn't know him, but he's almost sane compared with what he was before." She abandoned her pose of affected insincerity and turned to me with shining eyes. "You do love David, don't you?" she asked.

"My dear lady, I've only met him twice," I said.

"Isn't that more than enough?" Her expression changed restlessly; and I remembered wondering how long she would retain her looks, if she continued to live on her nerves like this. "Too many dam' dull Daintons here, you know. I made certain mother would think this sort of thing too Bohemian. She'd like me to have a prim and proper little house in one of the streets about here and entertain the conventional people in the conventional way —simply wagging my tail if I enticed an Under-Secretary here. Mother'd go miles for an Under-Secretary. Well, it's much more fun inviting the amusing people, the people you *like*. I *am* rather a Bohemian, I've always led my own life. I do now. Darling David never tries to make me do anything or stop me doing anything, he never wants to know what I've been doing. . . . All the same, David's 'duty to one's neighbour' stunt. . . . Thank goodness! he doesn't expect me to share my clothes with casual visitors!"

She stood with her eyes fixed thoughtfully and without complete comprehension on her husband's thin, mobile face. His own, black and arresting for all their sightlessness, were turned to the rafters and the shadows of the roof, as he sat with head bent back and fingers idly modulating. Then Lady Dainton came forward and took her leave; the party broke up rapidly, and, by the time that I left, only Vincent Grayle remained, talking to his hostess, while Beresford transferred himself to the other end of the room, ostentatiously turning his back and resting his injured leg on the edge of O'Rane's piano stool.

2

I left the grotesque party with the feeling that contrary to all reasonable expectation I had enjoyed myself immoderately. The enthusiasm survived the night, and at breakfast the following day I informed Yolande that I proposed to invite the O'Ranes to dine with us. Here, however, I was met with unforeseen opposition. I have no idea how the antagonism started, but at some period of their careers Yolande had decided that Mrs. O'Rane was of those who "do all the things one doesn't do," while Mrs. O'Rane has been known to dismiss my niece alliteratively as a "prig, prude and *poseuse*."

"You'll regret it," Yolande told me frankly enough, sagaciously smoothing back a strand of auburn hair from her forehead. "She's very fascinating, but I've an instinct about her, and you'll find she's all superfluity and flashiness. Any number of people have been in love with her, of course, but she'll grate on you. Ask any woman."

One dinner, I felt, could not commit me very deeply, and it was my own house, although I was already debating the desirability of moving into bachelor quarters and giving up my remaining rooms to the Canteen Executive. Yolande, however, was to be spared in spite of me.

Whether Mrs. O'Rane disaproved of her as strongly as she disapproved of Mrs. O'Rane, I am incompetent to say, but I was informed in terms of suitable regret that she was either dining out or having people to dine with her every

night of the week; was it possible, on the other hand, for me to come on one of the days when they were at home? I had not yet finished that talk with David about Melton. . . . The reminder was perhaps inserted as a reason for not inviting Yolande.

I chose my night and, within five minutes of entering the house, I should have confessed, had I been honest with myself, that Yolande was right. An air of tension greeted me, an interrupted controversy was at once resumed, and I found myself required by my hostess to arbitrate in a lovers' quarrel. The cause of dispute was the girl Hilda Merryon, whose career O'Rane had briefly sketched for my benefit; fortunately she was not present at the time, but with O'Rane composed, pacific and unyielding in an arm-chair with his big St. Bernard beside him, Mrs. O'Rane flushed and aggrieved with one foot on the fender and one bare arm shielding her face from the fire, and Vincent Grayle, my fellow guest, directing and perhaps stimulating the controversy, I felt that we had enough disputants.

"I'll put it to Mr. Stornaway!" cried Mrs. O'Rane, as soon as our greetings were over. "Mr. Stornaway, we were only married in July, it's now the end of September, and I don't think David ought to go off and leave me for three months. It isn't necessary, I've asked him not to——"

O'Rane stroked the dog's head reflectively.

"But you've told me you can't get away, Sonia," he said at length. "You've got your Belgian refugee work, you've got a string of engagements and you've got Beresford laid up for months yet. You admitted, too, you'd simply be at a loose end in Melton."

"I should be with you." She tossed her head back until she was looking at him through half-closed eye-lids. "Of course, if you don't want me . . ."

"But, darling, your work here . . .?"

"Anybody can do that!" Mrs. O'Rane interrupted unguardedly. "That's not the point, though, and you know it isn't. I say you oughtn't to go. It's like setting a racehorse to pull a removal van."

In the pause that followed, I wondered what opportunities for propaganda Lady Dainton had enjoyed since our meeting the week before.

"I've *promised* to resign the *moment* I've paid back the money I *owe*," said O'Rane with emphatic reasonableness.

"The money was given you as a present."

"But I can't take presents of that kind so long as I'm fit to work. Darling Sonia, you don't imagine I want to go away from you for three months, do you? If you can come down without leaving your work here undone——"

"Oh, I should be in the way!" she interrupted with another toss of her head. "You've got your Hilda."

She looked round the room, pointedly inviting us to follow the direction of her eyes and nodding at the tidy arrangement of books, the filing-cabinet, the half-hidden safe and neat library card-catalogue. I could see O'Rane blushing, as I myself began to blush, that such a scene should be enacted before comparative strangers.

"You mustn't say things like that," he remonstrated gently; then, with the lightness of affected inspiration, "We'll put it to Mr. Stornaway, as you suggest! I'm committed, sir, as I think in honour and certainly by an understanding with the Headmaster, to go back to Melton on Thursday. You've met Miss Merryon; I'm taking her with me to act as a sort of secretary. She'll have rooms in the town and will lend me the use of her eyes in the evenings;— I was frightfully handicapped last term and had to take advantage of the boys' good-nature. I know it's an unusual arrangement, but the circumstances are unusual. I got Dr. Burgess's approval——"

"Did you tell him anything about her past?" Mrs. O'Rane broke in, tapping a gold slipper with scarlet heel against the fender.

O'Rane smiled dreamily.

"I'm chiefly concerned with her future," he answered. Something in the voice and smile told me that he was spiritually as far removed from his wife as the mad from the sane.

There was a long pause which Grayle broke by shrugging his shoulders, sighing, shaking his head at Mrs. O'Rane with an expression of rueful sympathy and finally opening his cigarette-case with a muttered request for permission to smoke.

"Of course, the world will *say*—," he began.

O'Rane laughed to himself.

"I don't know that I've ever paid much attention to what the world says. But Mr. Stornaway is going to arbitrate."

I looked at one disputant after another. Mrs. O'Rane's expression can best be described as mulish; O'Rane was smiling, debonair and yet, I felt,—it was the first time that I had felt it—unshakable. What part Grayle was playing I could not determine; if he had been invited to arbitrate before my arrival, he had not been successful, and I wished that he would leave me to compose the quarrel uninterrupted.

"If you've promised yourself to Dr. Burgess," I told O'Rane after consideration, "you can't disappoint him at forty-eight hours' notice. It's out of the question. You tell me that he approves of your taking Miss Merryon?"

"He'd do anything for me," O'Rane answered easily.

"Even so, if I may put it bluntly, it's an imprudent thing to do. Surely the simplest and most natural solution, as well as the pleasantest for both, is for Mrs. O'Rane to accompany you. If you want work found for Miss Merryon, that ought not to be difficult in these times; I'll pay any money for a competent shorthand-writer in my own office."

Neither O'Rane nor his wife offered any criticism, but Grayle considerately supplied the reason which both were hiding.

"That was discussed, I think," he said, "but I gather Mrs. O'Rane has her hands pretty full with work here."

"But you said anyone could do that," I reminded her. "And, as long as Bertrand's here, there'll be some one to look after Beresford."

In addition to Bertrand there were two maids and a

plenipotent housekeeper, for Mrs. O'Rane liked to boast of her domestic incompetence. Mine was the obvious solution, and I could see that she recognised it. There was a suppressed yawn—and a gain of three seconds.

"If I died, some one would *have* to do my work," she admitted, "or, it wouldn't be done. . . . But, Mr. Stornaway, David's a member of Parliament, his whole future is in the House; isn't it ridiculous for him to waste his time teaching a pack of schoolboys?"

As she shifted her ground, I felt that my work was done.

"I haven't got much future of any kind," I said, "but I'm a begging-letter writer in the morning and a second-class clerk in a government office the rest of the day. These are not normal times, Mrs. O'Rane, and he can't leave his chief stranded at the last moment without anyone to take his place. When he comes back at Christmas, there'll be an opportunity for reconsideration."

O'Rane said nothing, and I was disappointed. I felt that, as he had got his own way, it would have been diplomatic and perhaps convincing to pretend that he was consenting to a compromise. Mrs. O'Rane looked at him out of the corner of one eye and pouted openly.

"We might just as well not be married, if you don't want me," she said.

"Come, come! Mrs. O'Rane!" I cried.

I am afraid that the mild protest only inflamed her.

"Well, he doesn't! The other night we were talking about marriage. Peter Beresford says that any man who loves a woman may do anything to win her; it doesn't make any difference whether she's married or not——"

O'Rane leaned forward and resumed his stroking of the dog's head.

"Perhaps it makes a difference to the woman," he suggested.

"Then *David* said," she went on, regardless of this interruption, "that men and women weren't justified in spoiling each other's lives by clinging on when one was tired of the other."

Every word was purposefully clear, and at the end she paused invitingly. O'Rane sprang up with a ring of laughter and held out his arms to receive her.

"Sweetheart!"

She made no movement until he had come a pace nearer, then she stepped unrespondingly aside. O'Rane's hands met on the marble of the mantelpiece.

"I—missed you," he said with a little breathless laugh.

I could not turn to see Grayle's face, but I was rigid with horror that such a trick should be played on a blind man. Gradually what she had done dawned on Mrs. O'Rane, and she threw her arms convulsively round her husband's neck.

"God forgive me!" she whispered. "Oh, my darling, I'm mad! I don't know what I've been saying!"

I turned to Grayle and asked him for a cigarette. A moment later I heard a car stopping at the door, and Beresford was helped into the house after his drive.

From time to time throughout the meal (whenever, perhaps, Mrs. O'Rane was trying to make amends), my mind went back to the scene. The O'Ranes' outlook and temperament were so dissimilar that I could see no common ground between them. The outsider never knows why any two people marry and is content to believe in the existence of an affinity hidden from his view. These two were both so full of vitality, both so good-looking, and, above all, both so young that I tried hard to resist a feeling of melancholy and to persuade myself that I had been an inadvertent eavesdropper at the oldest and most trumpery quarrel in the world rather than the witness of an inevitable breach. The long windows on either side of the room were warmly curtained in flame-coloured silk; the two fires glowed comfortingly on to their half-circles of chairs and sofas. Mrs. O'Rane, who could make a story out of nothing, poured out an endless stream of anecdotes against herself. When dinner was over and we left the dais for a distant view of high-hung chandeliers reflected softly in the gleaming surface of the long refectory table, I could not but be reminded of the Grail scene in "Parsifal."

The discordant note, the one persistently discordant note, was struck by Beresford. Alien in mind from the rest of us, he neither forgave nor forgot the contemptuous toe which had once searched his body for signs of breakage; and after dinner he withdrew to a far divan and spent the evening conversing in whispers with Mrs. O'Rane, who sat by him on a footstool, while he played with her long amber necklace. The rest of us reverted to a wholly undergraduate disputation, led by O'Rane on the theme of my own unexpected fortune and developed by me into a disquisition on education and the art of healing, though every question and view was put forward in the hope of making my host expound his own philosophy.

"You can't get efficiency without organisation," Grayle insisted as we laid the lessons of the war to heart. "Nothing can hold together without discipline. Look at Germany."

For myself, I have always regarded German organisation as the over-advertised co-ordination of the largest number of second-rate intelligences, but the criticism was taken from me by Beresford, who interrupted his own conversation to inform the room at large that it was one thing to teach a man how to shoot and quite another to be sure that he did not end up by shooting his own officers. Mrs. O'Rane held up one finger and pursed her lips, only to let them break a moment later into a smile.

"Efficiency is the gravest menace that the war holds over us," said O'Rane reflectively. "Whenever I've met it, it means being unkind—with Government sanction—to some one weaker than yourself; Jesus Christ would not have been tolerated by the Charity Organisation Society, all the bourgeois press would have said that He was pampering the incompetent and maintaining the survival of the unfit. Efficiency frightens me."

Whether he was speaking seriously or in paradox, he had struck a note of idealism which jarred on Grayle, who threw away his cigar half-smoked.

"If we don't learn our lesson out of this war, we don't deserve to win it," he answered, reaching for his stick.

"But what is the lesson?" O'Rane asked, more of himself than of us. "Do you men find that you think best at night?" he went on reflectively. "There's less distraction . . . and I'm always thinking at night now. I would say that every man who comes out of this war alive is a reprieved man and that we don't deserve to win it unless we learn that the only crime in all the world is cruelty. . . . If we can't affect others, we can at least affect ourselves. It's no use waiting for an act of parliament to make you humane; if you're prepared to jump into the river to save a child from drowning, you must be prepared to jump through a window to save it from starving." He shook his head and turned to me. "But how you're going to teach that, sir, even with your million a year to endow schools. . . . The Church has had Peter's keys for nearly two thousand years, but how many of us would literally pick a man out of the street, turn on the hot water for him, lend him a razor and a rig-out, keep him in funds till his ship comes home. . . ." As he paused, I looked beyond him to the sofa where Beresford lay idly fingering Mrs. O'Rane's amber beads. "Of course it's all figurative and the gorgeous imagery of the East and that sort of thing, but I don't know how any man could remain a professing Christian for two minutes if he didn't believe that Christ would bathe the feet of the first tramp on the road. That's far more important to the human race than the Crucifixion. But then Christ was always poor, and you can't begin to be charitable until you've known what it means to be poor." His voice sank and grew silent. "I'm boring you, Grayle!" he exclaimed penitently, as a boot creaked on the polished floor.

"I must be getting home," was the answer, following hot-foot on an ill-suppressed yawn. "Boring me, indeed? Enjoyed it all immensely." He got up and walked towards Mrs. O'Rane, to whom he bade an elaborate good-bye, while I followed slowly behind, wondering how such a woman

ever came to marry such a man. "I shan't see you this side of Christmas, I suppose?"

She looked up a little negligently without releasing Beresford's hand.

"But I thought I was dining with you on Friday?"

"I understood you were going to Melton."

Mrs. O'Rane's expression became blank.

"I must think about this," she said. "Yes. I don't know how long it'll take me to tidy up things here. . . . Oh, I shall certainly be in London on Friday. David darling, you understand that I can't possibly get away at a moment's notice—any more than you can."

Her husband nodded.

"Come whenever it suits you," he said, as he walked on ahead to open the door for us.

Grayle lingered behind for a moment in the middle of the room.

"You mustn't stay on my account," he said to Mrs. O'Rane. "It won't be a *party,* you know."

There was a moment's silence; then she laughed provocatively and gave a mischievous, sideways glance at Beresford, which only Grayle and I saw.

"Jealous?" I heard.

"Not a bit. I shouldn't like you to come, though, if you were simply going to be bored."

"Oh, if you'd rather I didn't come, I won't."

I passed into the street and out of earshot. As I shook hands with O'Rane, Grayle joined us, and we walked towards the House on the look-out for a taxi. He was silent at first and then started to discuss the evening *communiqué* from the Front. I could not help wondering whether he, too, in middle-aged company under the penetrating chill of an autumn mist realised that it was beneath his dignity to be flirting with O'Rane's young wife and doubly ridiculous to be taking it seriously and devoting an evening's ill-humour to the enterprise.

"Do you care about dining on Friday?" he asked me

suddenly. "Mrs. O'Rane will be there, and I'll rope in some more people."

3

Ever since his return from South Africa, Grayle had occupied a small old house in Milrord Square, with a bleak, discouraged garden bounded at the far end by a private garage. I always wondered how he confined himself in so small a space, for his turbulent flaxen head seemed to scrape every ceiling and it was impossible for anyone to pass him on the stairs or in the doorway or corridor. When Guy Bannerman was required at the last moment, as now, to fill an unexpected gap, his loose-knit, centrifugal body seemed to take up every cubic foot of space not already appropriated to Grayle's use. But as a rule Guy was not allowed to leave the big work-room over the garage where he covered himself and his clothes in three different shades of ink and industriously "got up" his master's subjects and wrote his master's speeches, while Grayle himself devoted his talents to cultivating personal relationships, or, as his enemies would say, to intriguing, from a superstition that, if he ever let slip a conspiracy, it might not return to him again.

The party was small, the dinner perfectly cooked and served. This, at least, I had learned to expect from Grayle.

Mrs. O'Rane was on one side of me, and I asked how soon she was going to Melton, as I had shortly to attend my first meeting of the governing body. To my surprise I heard that she was not going at present.

"You see, there's my Belgian work," she explained, "and Peter can't walk yet, and I can't very well leave Mr. Oakleigh to the care of the servants. Besides I've got an awful lot of other things to do." She nodded across the table at Lady Barbara Neave. "Mr. Lane's written a duologue, and Babs and I are acting in it at the Regency. And I've got a stall at the Albert Hall in November, and I'm sure to be wanted for the Imperial Hospital Fund *tableaux*. They can't get on without us, can they, Babs darling?" Lady

Barbara jerked her fair head quickly and returned to her conversation with young Lane. "David was quite right, too; I should be at a loose end at Melton."

Her reasons flowed easily, but they were not consistent with her earlier attitude.

"I thought you'd fixed it up the other night," I said.

"No. We had another talk after you'd gone. It's only three months, and, if he really wants me—" She broke off, leaving me to surmise that she was engaging in a trial of strength with her husband. "This is quite a pre-war dinner, isn't it? I love dining with Colonel Grayle; he's one of the few people who hasn't got the war on the brain. I do get so tired of war-talk, war-economies, war-work. I wish the thing would end, but Colonel Grayle says it will never end while the present government's in power; and Peter says there'll be a revolution when it *does* end, so it's a cheerful look-out either way. Don't you think Peter's improved since he fell in love with me?" She turned to look down the table with the rapid movement of an animal, and the lamps seemed to strike sparks of gold from her closely coiled brown hair. "It takes people different ways; Colonel Grayle will hardly speak to me to-night, just because I invited him to dinner and then forgot all about it."

"Mrs. O'Rane," I said, "may I tell you that you talk a great deal of nonsense?"

She darted a glance at me and then opened her eyes very wide, drawing down the corners of her mouth.

"Ah, you're hating me now! And I thought you were surrendering to my well-known charm. I *have* got an incredible amount of charm, haven't I?"

"We were talking about Melton," I reminded her.

"George—our friend George Oakleigh, I mean; he's known me all my life—," she went on, imperturbably munching salted almonds, "George says that, as part of his education, every man ought to marry me for just one month."

"Actually you've been married two and a half, haven't

you?" I enquired. "Perhaps you haven't arrived at the full inwardness of George's criticism."

She pouted like a child under reproof.

"I suppose you both mean something horrid." Her eyes lit up mischievously. "I must tell George I've found an ally for him. He's always rather loved me, but he says quite definitely that he never wanted to marry me even for a week. He's always telling me so; that's why we're such friends. I'm afraid you'll never even *rather* love me; and I'm ready to take *such* a lot of trouble with you."

Mrs. O'Rane's voice is faultlessly clear; I noticed a lull in the conversation and discovered that she and I were performing a duologue for the diversion of our fellow-guests and the exasperation of our host.

"Has George told you that you think about yourself too much?" I asked, as a self-conscious murmur rose once more around us.

"Oh, if you want a list of my bad qualities, go to your niece. I'm not such a success with serious people, and Yolande talks about 'Ministers,' when she means 'the Government,' and '25 George II,' when she wants to quote some musty old law; and she considers herself a political hostess because she once bribed the Committee of the Aborigines Protection Society to meet the Governor of the Seychelles at dinner. Yolande would start a salon on one poet and two private secretaries! Oh, I know she's your niece, but you can't help that." She paused to draw breath. "George only thinks that I'm second-rate."

"I think that you're deliberately second-rate," I said. "Which is a pity. If you'd ever got to grips with life, if you'd suffered or been in love——"

"D'you mean that I'm not in love with David?"

"You're still trying on emotions in a room full of mirrors. By the way, we went through all this candour and self-absorption in the 'nineties, and I think people did it better then. If you'll take advice from a comparative stranger, twice your age, drop all this patter about this man and that being in love with you."

Mrs. O'Rane became suddenly majestic.

"You mean I'm behaving disloyally to David?" she demanded.

Her majesty was as superficial and unconvincing as everything else about her.

"My dear young lady, if you must try these airs and graces, don't try them on me," I begged, watching curiously to see whether there was any criticism she would resent so long as it was focussed on her.

She turned slowly away with everything of affronted dignity except its essence, exactly as I had expected her to do. A moment later she turned to me again, but by that time Lady Maitland, whose vigorous head and neck always makes me think of a lioness that has been rolling in French chalk, had first asked me to find a place in my office for her third boy, who was leaving school at Christmas and seemed too delicate for the army, though he was exceptionally quick at figures—just the man that the Treasury wanted—and then enquired what I knew of the young Beresford who was staying at "The Sanctuary." She would like me to bring him to see her as soon as he was able to get out. He was a poet, she understood; very wrong-headed about the war, but a good talker and interesting to meet. . . . She had a small party on Thursday; that man Christie, who had been removed forcibly from the House for calling the Speaker a liar and refusing to withdraw, a ritualistic clergyman who was in conflict with the Court of Arches, an obscure traveller who had proceeded on foot from Loanda to Port Sudan, the managing director of the Broadway music-hall and a novelist whose name she had forgotten.

(I may here say that I went and was given the opportunity of stroking all the lions' necks twelve hours before the proletariat caught sight of them and of trying to explain Lady Maitland to several little knots of bewildered Scandinavian and Dutch delegates and some self-conscious and incorruptible Labour Members who had either resigned from the Ministry or hoped to get into it. What Lady Maitland thought of the lions, they and we knew at once;

what the lions thought of Lady Maitland they had hardly time to formulate before being hurried away to tea at Ross House, dinner with old Lady Pentyre and supper at Mrs. Carmichael's. I have found it easier never to refuse anything to Lady Maitland, but I hesitate to reckon how many times in a political crisis I have been persuaded to lead political aspirants to school. When O'Shaunessy was returned as a Sinn Feiner and refused to take his seat, I, who had met him in America five and twenty years before, was deputed to bring him to luncheon and Federal Home Rule with the Carmichaels, dinner and a united-Ireland-in-the-face-of-the-enemy with the Duchess of Ross. There was to have been a patient search for compromise at Lady Pentyre's next day, but O'Shaunessy shook his head at me over the brim of his tumbler and confided that these people gave you too much talk and too little to drink.)

"You'd better get Mrs. O'Rane to bring Beresford," I said. "I hardly know him."

"Someone must get hold of him before it's too late," Lady Maitland continued gravely, and I could see that he was going to be adopted, whether he liked it or not. "I hear he's got great ability, and it's all misdirected."

"I'd never heard of him before," I confessed. "But then I don't read modern poetry."

"I heard of him from our host—this is between ourselves, of course—; there was some question of prosecuting him again for one of his pamphlets." She raised her voice to demand confirmation of Grayle, but he would only shake his head rather irritably at her want of discretion and say that it was not in the province of his department. "I must talk to dear Sonia about him," she went on, "and we'll arrange a little meeting."

Not only have I led promising statesmen by the hand, I have myself of late been alternately schooled and courted in a way that was hardly known to me before the war. It is partly due, I suppose, to the suspended animation of the Caucus, partly to the increased number of groups and their social backers. As Lady Maitland convoyed the other

women to the drawing-room, Grayle threw his sound leg across the shattered knee and told me he was not at all satisfied about our reinforcements. At that, after but five weeks in England, I knew what was coming. Guy Bannerman, with the deep, baying voice of a hound, supplied the dwindling figures of the daily returns, I criticised the waste of resources in men and ships on secondary fields of war, Grayle opined that the country would never appreciate that it was at war until every man was mobilised in the field, the shipyard or the shop, and Maitland took the safe but irritating and unhelpful line that Kitchener knew what he was about and that we must leave it to him.

I preferred to move away and talk to young Lane about his new play, but Grayle quickly recalled me with an exhortation to join him and his friends in their effort to galvanise the Government to action. It was the first of a long series of appeals which terminated a year later with the unblushing bribe of an office which I had as little fitness or right to receive as Grayle to offer. I was content to take refuge in Maitland's advice to leave it to the Government (alternatively to "trust the P. M."; a surprising political retrogression for a man of his antecedents), only adding that one Government should not have to shoulder single responsibility for the joint blunders of all the Allies.

"It's something to cut your losses," said Grayle shortly and with an air of disappointment, "to drop a mistaken policy when it's proved to be mistaken. That's what I want to see done; and that's what this gang of yours won't do. You watch out; France and Russia will make a separate peace, if we don't pull our weight. Let's come up-stairs."

On entering the drawing-room, Guy Bannerman strolled to the fire and entered into conversation with Lady Barbara Neave. Left with a choice of Lady Maitland and Mrs. O'Rane, Grayle pulled up a chair beside Lady Maitland, while Mrs. O'Rane looked at him like a chess-player considering his opponent's last move and then smilingly made room for me on the sofa by her side.

"I thought you were never coming up," she said. "I'm

going in a minute, but Lady Maitland tells me she wants to meet Peter, and I waited to find out if you'd come, too. Any day next week."

"I shall be delighted," I said. "Friday's my only free night."

"Good. It will be just the four of us. Dear Sir Maurice is such a bore, poor darling; I really *can't* invite him. Now I must go. Shall we say somewhere about eight?"

As she got up, I looked at my watch and found that, for all the excellence of the dinner and the time that we were charged with spending over our wine, it was not yet ten. The Maitlands gave no hint of leaving, nor did Mrs. O'Rane vouchsafe a reason for her early departure. I saw her shaking hands with Grayle and heard him icily asking her to wait while he telephoned for a cab. With equal polite iciness of tone she assured him that she would find one in the Brompton Road. I saw her smiling mischievously to herself, as she walked out of the room; Grayle's smile, on his return, was mysterious, and I surmised that another trial of strength was in progress.

As we stood on the door-step an hour later, I asked him if we were meeting at "The Sanctuary" the following week.

"She said something about it," he answered, "but I shan't go."

"You're too old for this sort of nonsense, Grayle," I told him.

"What sort of nonsense?"

But before I could answer, a taxi crawled invitingly past the door.

4

I have never been able to cope collectedly with a verbal invitation and I am now too old to acquire the art. Otherwise I should have found an excuse for leaving my intimacy with Mrs. O'Rane where it was. I had dined the first time at "The Sanctuary" for the sake of her husband; he interested me, baffled me, refused to let me get to grips with him, and I did not intend to be beaten. His wife, I felt, for all

her surface fascination and vitality, was rather a waste of time. And her retinue of fashionable actresses, elderly men about town and Guards subalterns was intellectually too exotic for me. I determined that my second dinner with her should be my last.

The door was unlocked, when I arrived, and Beresford was in undisputed possession of the long, warm library, though several large boxes of chocolates, an earthenware jar of expensive cigarettes, a parcel of books half out of their paper and string and a profusion of hot-house flowers dispelled any rash assumption that Mrs. O'Rane was being neglected by her admirers. And, whilst I waited for her, Beresford told me that the original party of four had multiplied itself by three. After a pause, in which he tried not to seem self-conscious, he asked whether I knew the O'Ranes well and rather wistfully volunteered his opinion that there was no real sympathy between them and that she was unhappy and unappreciated.

"I sometimes wonder why she married him," he murmured.

"Presumably because they were in love with each other," I said.

He shook his head with judicial gravity and an air of profounder knowledge than a middle-aged, unsympathetic man like me could hope to attain.

"I don't think they're happy. I should like to see her happier, she's made such a difference in my life. Women mean something more to me, somehow, since I met her . . ." he confided, with a boy's curious passion to discuss his emotional state with anyone who will listen.

"She hasn't yet learned the difference between happiness and pleasure," I told him.

The new tempestuous disorder which the room presented in O'Rane's absence—paper and string and half-opened parcels abandoned when a more pressing call made itself heard—struck me as being typical of the woman. And she was late for dinner, which I consider impolite in a hostess.

Beresford must have seen a hint of disapproval in my

face. "Has it occurred to you that all this racket is *deliberate,* that she wants to live in the present . . .?"

He relapsed into silence and sat supporting his lean, long face with one hand. I felt Mrs. O'Rane had civilised him to some purpose and that, unless he lapsed from civilisation within the next quarter of an hour, Lady Maitland would find that her rebel-hunt had been in vain. I also felt that the sooner Mrs. O'Rane rejoined her husband, ceased dining with Grayle, going to the theatre with young Guardsmen and giving Beresford the idea that she was lonely, the better for all and especially for her.

Deganway and Pentyre, who evidently knew Mrs. O'Rane's ways better than I did, arrived ten minutes later. We were still awaiting our hostess, when Lady Maitland sailed in and, dispensing with introductions, opened fire at a distance of twenty paces.

"Darling Sonia not dressed yet? But, then, no one's ever known her in time for anything. How do you do, Mr. Stornaway? I suppose this is Mr. Beresford? Now, Mr. Beresford, I want to have a long talk with you; I hear you're a very original young man and I want to know why you're a pro-German."

Thus encouraged, Beresford roused himself to demonstrate the difference between sympathy with German atrocities and antagonism to war and the system of government which made it possible. I, who have heard him for a moment haranguing street loafers and have myself engaged in ding-dong argument with him, little thought to see him so completely routed by the sonorous enquiries of Lady Maitland, who put a question, announced parenthetically that she was a woman with no nonsense about her and flung out a second question before he could answer the first. Deganway stood polishing his eyeglass and murmuring sagaciously "Yes! Yes! *That's* what our good pacifists never condescend to explain." Pentyre lit a cigarette and confessed to hunger. Two more young officers, whose names I never heard and whom I have never met again, drifted in with a "Sonia not down yet?" and also lit ciga-

rettes. I was glad when Mrs. O'Rane arrived to end Beresford's agony.

Without a word of apology for her lateness, she fluttered like a butterfly into our midst, brushed Lady Maitland's cheek with her lips and pirouetted slowly on her toes like a ballet-dancer.

"How d'you like my new dress, children?" she enquired. "Say you do or you don't, but please don't try to find reasons, or you're sure to go wrong. Peter's the only one here who knows anything about colour, Lady Maitland, and everything I wear has to meet with his approval."

She stopped her pirouetting in front of his sofa and stood, panting slightly and with shining eyes, holding her skirt out on either side and courtesying low. Beresford appraised it slowly, his head on one side, fingering the stuff and taking in every detail from the gold and silver band round her hair to the silk stockings and gilt slippers. An embarrassed maid awaited her opportunity of announcing dinner, Mrs. O'Rane threw her head back and smiled at me over her shoulder, with parted lips.

"Someone appreciates me," she laughed. For the first time I realised what her young and not very sinful vanity must miss by never being able to hear a word of pride or praise from her husband. Sonia O'Rane always reminded me of a child who cannot build a castle in the sand without dragging someone by the wrist to come and admire it. "I don't think you did that night at Colonel Grayle's," she said to me. "In fact it was very forgiving of me to ask you. I've never been so found fault with by anyone except David, and he's given it up since we married. I sometimes wonder whether it is because he thinks I'm perfect or only not worth bothering about now he's got me."

"I only recall saying that you talked a great deal of nonsense," I put in. "I stand by that."

"Well, that's a nice thing to say when I'd refused three invitations from people who were just dying to hear me talk. However, I suppose I'm a cultivated taste."

"And you only invited me in the hope of making me retract," I added.

"Let's have some dinner," she suggested, avoiding my challenge.

She spread out two gleaming white arms with the movement of a bird taking wing and waltzed to the table, calling to us over her shoulder to sort ourselves anyhow; the order did not matter as there were ten men and two women. As the others stood back for me to make my choice, I put myself on her left with Lady Maitland on the other side.

"When do you go to Melton?" I asked conscientiously, as we settled to our places.

She pointed a finger at Beresford.

"I can't leave my ewe lamb yet," she answered. "D'you know, last night I was up with him until nearly three, considering which I think I'm looking remarkably fresh tonight. . . . Besides, David hasn't *asked* me to come. . . ."

Her clear and slightly over-emphatic voice travelled disconcertingly as far as Lady Maitland, who enquired with some surprise, "Does Mr. Beresford live here?" She was answered with a mischievous nod. "My dear, you know I always say right out whatever's in my mind; well, I don't think you ought to be doing that. With that blessed creature of a husband here——"

"But he *brought* Peter here and *kept* him here and finally *left* him here—whether I liked it or not, Peter dear. Besides, darling Lady Maitland, I have Mr. Oakleigh to chaperon us, and George drops in every few hours to see that I'm not disgracing his precious David. . . . George once said that I atoned for the number of my flirtations by the excellence of my technique," she went on irrelevantly. "I think he'd just fallen out of love with me and pretended that he never *had* been in love with me and never would be. You think I'm not good enough for David, don't you?" she demanded of me. "I think he got the wife he deserved, and he'll tell you that's the finest compliment anyone can pay him."

"I'll ask him, if I remember. I'm going to Melton next week. Have you any message for him?"

She deliberated with one finger pressed to her lips.

"Tell him—exactly what you think of me," she suggested with dancing eyes. "It'll amuse him much more than a message."

"Are you going down to him this term?"

She shook her head.

"I'm too busy, and he doesn't want me, or he'd have sent for me long ago. Not that I should have gone, of course. . . ." She glanced quickly round to satisfy herself that the others were absorbed in their own conversations; then lowered her voice and laid her hand on my sleeve. "Mr. Stornaway, you *do* agree with me that it's absolute rot for him to be there, don't you? Old Mr. Oakleigh's offered him any money he wants—again and again; I've got five hundred a year from father; he could wipe out what he calls his debts and live here with the utmost ease. And he ought to be in London, he ought to be in the House; there are all sorts of jobs that he could get in the City. . . . If you want a message, tell him that he must choose Melton or me," she went on with a pout and a rising voice. "If he hasn't chucked Melton by Christmas, I shall chuck him. Tell him that I shall elope to Sloane Square—I don't believe *any*one's ever eloped to Sloane Square, but it's the handiest place in the world; even the Hounslow and Barking non-stop trains stop there,—so sweet of them, I always think—I shall go there with Peter and live in his flat and star in revue where I shall be an amazing draw, you know; and Colonel Grayle would scowl at me from the stage box, and, darling Lady Maitland, you'd boom me and invite fashionable clergymen to meet me at lunch, and George would have his car at the stage door to take me home—I don't know that I *shall* wait till Christmas."

She paused for lack of breath and looked delightedly round the table. My expression, I imagine, was bored, Lady Maitland's perplexed; only poor Beresford's was unaffectedly pained.

"Mr. Stornaway's quite right," Lady Maitland said, when she had collected herself. "You talk a great deal of nonsense."

"I mean it, though."

"Rubbish, my dear."

Yet I believe that both she and I felt a current of discontent running underneath the froth of nonsense. Perhaps we shewed it, perhaps Lady Maitland reconsidered her judgement, for, when Deganway sat down to play rag-time after dinner and Mrs. O'Rane kicked the rugs aside and began dancing with Pentyre, she observed at impressive intervals——

"Darling Sonia is always in such spirits". . . "I don't think it's quite the thing for a young man like that—quite good-looking, you know—to be living here; Mr. O'Rane will have a great deal to answer for, if there's any unpleasantness, and you can give him that message from *me*." . . . "Tell him a husband's place is beside his wife. . . . But he must make her a home where she can live. I forget whether you were here that night—yes, you were! Well, Lady Dainton's quite right. . . . Just like the casual-ward of a workhouse. . . ." "Of course, her mother brought her up atrociously". . . "I really hope that she's going to have a family; it would just make the difference."

A week later I motored to Melton for the Governors' meeting. Town and school alike had become almost unrecognisable since my last visit three or four years earlier. Leagues of huts, miles of tents, acres of pickets stretched from the outskirts of Melton to the fringe of Swanley Forest; the drowsy cathedral town was alive with thundering lorries, and the billeting officer's handiwork was visible at eight windows out of ten. My car crawled apprehensively through the crowded streets and up the hill to a school which was half as it had been founded three hundred years before, half as it had been converted into a military academy during the last fifteen months. Great Court echoed with the clatter and scrape of hob-nailed boots, as the corps fell in and marched off to parade on the practice-ground; one

group of signallers on the steps of the headmaster's house waved frantically to another group by the entrance to Great School, and, as I wandered into the Cloisters to kill time before the hour of our meeting, the Green was filled with pigmy recruits, learning their squad-drill from a husky but intensely business-like young sergeant. Only a handful of obvious weaklings wore the old conventional straw hat, grey trousers and dark jacket, and the open door of the Common Room at Big Gate shewed not more than two-thirds of the staff in cap and gown.

"War takes on a new horror and hopelessness, when you know that the schools of France and Germany present the same sight," I said to Dr. Burgess.

Our meeting was over, and he was conducting me round the unaging school buildings which I was thenceforth to hold in joint trust. The company drill on the practice-ground was giving way to a final parade, and we watched four hundred young soldiers from twelve to eighteen march erect and with set faces to the Armoury and from the Armoury to Great School for a lantern lecture on the Dardanelles expedition. A couple of dozen non-commissioned officers had fallen out and were awaiting a course in map-reading with their commanding officer.

"Thank Heaven! it will all be over before most of these boys are old enough to go out and stop bullets," I added.

Dr. Burgess stroked his long beard and shook a mournful head. "Some were yet in our midst when the appointed season came," he said, pointing to an already long Roll thumb-tacked to a wire-covered notice-board. "And they that have returned——" He sighed deeply. "David O'Rane enjoins me to say that he is within."

We shook hands at the door of a bachelor set of chambers in the Cloisters, and Dr. Burgess strode back to his house, murmuring mournfully into his beard. I knocked and entered to find O'Rane seated—as I might have expected to find a man with his physical dislike for chairs—in the middle of the floor with the big, patient head of his Saint Bernard on his knees. Miss Merryon was writing at a

table in the window, and a low wicker-work couch by the fire was timidly occupied by a flushed and disputatious malefactor. She welcomed me by name to give the cue before making an excuse to withdraw. I apologised to O'Rane for disturbing him, but he dismissed the boy and turned with a smile and sigh of relief.

"We'd both had enough of it," he confessed. "That young man thought fit to play a practical joke on Miss Merryon, so I've been taking his moral education in hand, appealing to his self-interest."

He felt for a box of cigarettes and threw them to me.

"Well?" I said.

"I remember getting held up at Bâle some years ago," he explained. "I was on my way home from Italy and I missed the eleven o'clock connection to Paris. There were crowds of us there—some on our way back from Italy, like me, some from the winter sports in Switzerland—all ages and races, on every kind of business or pleasure. The next train to Paris left the following day, and we had to reconcile ourselves to an uncomfortable night. Well, I've tried so many varieties of discomfort that I'm hardened and philosophical; I imagine most people would call these quarters uncomfortable, but they're nothing like what they were before Sonia took them in hand last summer."

He waved proudly at a pair of massive, discoloured velvet curtains, a bamboo overmantel and occasional table, wicker chairs half-buried in punt cushions and a threadbare carpet tattooed by generations of burning matches. I put up with the same sort of thing at Trinity, but I was then nineteen and I had no wife to accommodate. Mrs. O'Rane, I imagine, was not schooled to discomfort.

"I got a good deal of amusement and interest out of watching the others," he went on. "The French were the worst—voluble, excited, indignant, grabbing the best places and all the food they could lay hands on in the buffet—the way they always behave when they're travelling; the next worse were the Germans—they were ruder and more inconsiderate than the French, but not nearly so efficient. The

Americans all set themselves to westernise Europe and started getting off protests by cable to Paris, ordering special trains and booking three times the accommodation available at any hotel. The English were bored, aloof, taking themselves and their troubles very seriously and refusing to share them with anyone. Well, when the last bedroom had been snapped up, there were still enough of us benighted to overcrowd the waiting-rooms and buffet, we were all suffering from a sense of grievance, and there wasn't enough food to go round. I got wedged into a corner with a plate of meat and looked on. One of the Englishmen commented loudly on the noise that a German made in eating soup. The comment was understood, so the German laid himself out to shew the sort of noise he *could* make when he tried. The Englishman wrapped himself in a ferocious dignity, finished his meal and lit a cigar, sending a cloud of smoke in the face of one of the Italians. My attention was then attracted by a brawl in the middle of the buffet; someone had imprudently left his seat to forage for food, and someone else had promptly bagged it. As they bickered and gesticulated and finally pushed each other about and the onlookers took sides and joined in, I said to myself, 'Lord God! this buffet is just like the world, and these fools are behaving just as we all behave, and we should all despise and laugh at ourselves as much as I'm laughing now, if we had any detachment, self-criticism, humour, logic or God's common sense.' "

O'Rane's black eyes lit up at the memory of the scene.

"I was telling that story to our young friend," he continued with his baffling smile. "Chivalry? Nothing doing. Moral sanctions and first causes? Nothing doing. *He* didn't believe in God, *he* wasn't going to Hell, if he misbehaved himself, so why in the name of reason should he bother? . . . But I should think I fixed him over my Bâle story. . . . We had a hideous night (it was too cold to go and sulk outside—which made the symbolism more perfect; you can't sulk outside this world, unless you're prepared to cut your throat); and we might have made it quite

tolerable, if only we'd had a little imagination and kindliness, if we'd struck an international bargain and surrendered the privilege of eating soup noisily in return for immunity from cigar smoke in the eyes, if the chairs had only been given to the women and old men, if someone had only lent a hand to a poor boy who was coughing himself sick with asthma. . . ." He whistled reflectively between his teeth for a moment. "Life's like a club, sir; there are rules and conventions and an endless mass of tradition—the things we don't do; but the rules were made so long ago, the conventions only aim at an irreducible minimum. Even so, it's better than treating the world like a company trading for profit, but we must modernise the rules. As you know, I always want to delete 'efficiency' from the English language; efficiency in the Bâle buffet would have meant that an organised party of four, back to back, could have downed the rest, grabbed all the food and cleared the till.

"Keep your temper. Never answer (that was why they spat and swore).
"Don't hit first, but move together (there's no hurry) to the door.
"Back to back, and facing outward while the linguist tells 'em how—
" 'Nous sommes allong a notre batteau, nous ne voulong pas un row.'
"So the hard, pent rage ate inward, till some idiot went too far . . .
" 'Let 'em have it!' and they had it, and the same was serious war,
"Fist, umbrella, cane, decanter, lamp and beer-mug, chair and boot—
"Till behind the fleeing legions rose the long, hoarse yell for loot."

O'Rane's luminous black eyes were gleaming with mischief. Remembering my first sight of him, when he fought for his life in a Vienna café, I wondered whether any wife, reinforced by any mother, could curb his restless yearning after action, were it blacking the eye of an oppressor or slinging a disabled man on to his shoulders. . . . For all his cosmopolitan spirit I could not fit him into the Byzantine world in which Lady Dainton had brought up her daughter nor into the Merveilleuse society into which her daughter had gravitated.

"It's—it's *really* only a very big club," he murmured.

"Full of most undesirable members," I suggested. The Bâle story, I felt, would be wasted on Vincent Grayle.

"They're not acclimatised yet. Now, you'd open the door for the most undesirable member of the Eclectics, if he had a game leg, yet you laugh at me if I pick up an injured man in the street and carry him home for treatment. God's name! Where's the difference? *You're* not acclimatised yet, you see. It's to your interest, too. . . . How is Beresford, by the way? Sonia's the most undutiful wife in the way of writing; I suppose it's natural enough, really; she doesn't like having her letters to me read by anyone else."

I never forgave the old men who advised and hampered me, pinning me to a career for which I was unsuited and quarrelling with me when I broke away from it. In my turn I have tried to refrain from advising and hampering the younger generation—only to find that the younger generation sometimes makes an astonishing fool of itself and that it is harder and harder to sit silent and unintervening when someone whom I like is on the verge of falling downstairs in the dark or of having his pocket picked. Commenting on the fact that he was at Melton, while his wife was in London, I warned O'Rane that, with their double portion of wilfulness and energy, he was taking unnecessary risks with his married life.

"I've not got much to go on," I admitted, "but that supper-party you brought me to. . . ."

"That was exceptional," he objected. "And they were Sonia's friends. You were the only one I invited."

I reminded him of Beresford, Miss Merryon and perhaps three more obvious recipients of his charity. He coloured slightly and told me that it was an article of faith with him not to refuse help to anyone who asked. Then I could see that he was not being honest with himself, for he shifted his ground, concentrated on Beresford and asserted that his wife liked him to be in the house.

"But do you think he ought to be there?" I asked, following him on to the ground which he had chosen. "They're

both young, attractive; your wife's a very fascinating and beautiful woman. She can take care of herself, of course. . . . It was in fact commented on at dinner the other night."

O'Rane wrinkled his nose in dissatisfaction.

"He's company for Sonia," he said weakly.

"*You'd* be company for her, if she came here or you went to live in London. Much better company, too," I added.

My tone may have betrayed more than I intended to convey, for O'Rane laughed.

"You don't like her friends? *I* don't care a great lot for some of them, but you must remember that she gave up a good deal to marry me—a very full life—and I can't give her much. What I can give her is the freest possible hand. That's why I haven't pressed her to come down here, though, God knows, it's lonely enough without her. By Easter, if not Christmas——"

"Won't you have given this up by Christmas?" I asked.

His face grew tired and perplexed, and he ran his fingers impatiently through his hair.

"I don't know. I owe the devil of a lot of money; and I should be damned body and soul, if I lived on charity when I could earn my own livelihood. We'll discuss it at Christmas. In the meantime, can you stay and dine with me in Common Room?"

His invitation was a reminder that I had already stayed perilously long, if I was to get back to London in time for a dinner engagement.

"See me to my car," I said, as I put on my coat. "Look here, don't think I'm a mere busybody. You and your wife are such a pair of children that you mustn't mind a man twice your age telling you, if he thinks you're behaving foolishly. I strongly advise you to throw this over at Christmas. Now not another word."

O'Rane walked in silence through the Cloisters with one hand on the Saint Bernard's collar. As we came into Great Court, he stopped abruptly.

"Look here, sir; understand one thing," he began. "If

you think I mind or that I'm not grateful to you for speaking like this, I shall never forgive you. But you say Sonia's to be trusted to take care of herself. That's enough. If she wasn't——" He shrugged his shoulders—"she wouldn't be worth keeping. If she fell in love with—who shall we say?—Beresford and ran away with him, in God's name d'you think I should want to stop her? I admit I've only been married three months, but to me love's a thing of perfect, implicit trust. This is between ourselves, but last week George Oakleigh came down for Founder's Day and dropped a hint that Sonia was lunching and dining out too much with—well, I suppose there's no harm in saying it—Grayle. As with you, someone had commented on it at dinner. I'm afraid I couldn't pump up the slightest indignation. Grayle's rather in love with her. So's Beresford. So's that squeaky tame-cat, Deganway, of the Foreign Office. So's one of my boys here—George's cousin Laurie, who firmly believes that he brought me up to the scratch and made me propose—rather against my will. So's young Pentyre, so's half the Brigade. If I wanted to be jealous, sir, I'm afraid I shouldn't have time. As it is, I'm so proud of Sonia that I glory in seeing other people proud of her, loving her. . . . As for stray comments at dinner—I don't say it's right and I don't say it's wrong, but she belongs to a very modern school which goes its own way *without* regarding stray comments at dinner. But so long as we agree that she's to be trusted——?"

We had reached Big Gate, and he held out his hand to me with the mischievous smile which I was beginning to know so well and which always filled me with a sense of helplessness. As I looked at him with the October wind blowing through his black hair, I reflected that he must think me very old-fashioned to be surprised when a three-month-old wife boasted of the men who were in love with her and her husband derived a reflected happiness from her successes.

Driving back to London I felt that I was escaping mile by mile from a bewildering world of serious make-believe.

5

My engagement that night was to dine with Harry Merefield and to discuss something which, he said, he could explain better by word of mouth than in a letter. I was intrigued by the invitation, because Merefield at this time was of considerable account in the Foreign Office. We dined at his Club, and, as the only other person present was Barton, who had thrown up his work at Cambridge twelve months before and was now my official chief in the Treasury, I divined that they contemplated a deal in my person. The preliminaries were already settled, and, as we drank our sherry, Merefield confided that the Foreign Office wanted me to go out to America ostensibly to raise money for the War Charities Fund, in reality to carry on a campaign of propaganda; my knowledge of country and people would be invaluable and our relations had reached a point where we could no longer afford to do nothing. Would I think over the proposal?

"If this Press agitation goes *on* . . ." he began grimly and lapsed into eloquent silence.

I must confess that I have never been able to understand what function Ministers proposed that the Press should fulfil; they set up a Bureau to control the supply of news and occasionally to restrain editorial comment, but their interest seemed to die when once the War Office had secured that direct military information was not to be disclosed and that discussions and attacks should not take place round the head of this or that commander. Valiantly they feared nothing, despondently they hoped for nothing from a somewhat despised organisation which, despite their contempt, believed in its own power and was capable daily of placing the same view before every man and woman in the country until a vague but obstinate conviction arose that "there must be something in it." The Press with a little diplomatic flattery, might have become the handmaid of the Government; with promptitude and vigour it could have been emasculated to the semblance of an official bul-

letin. Instead, Ministers treated it like an intrusive wasp, slapping at it with ineffectual petulance, ducking their heads and running away when it was angered, until Sir John Woburn and half a dozen of his fellows were left to suggest, condemn, support and attack, to push favourite ministers and policies, to be inspired by those same ministers and to indulge in superficial criticism and the promulgation of half-truths which were harder to overtake and refute than a substantial, well-defined lie. Though never a Minister, I am afraid that I must accept my share of responsibility, for, when the House of Commons abrogated its duty of criticism, reform or remedy became possible only by a Press campaign.

"I don't give Woburn credit for excessive modesty," said Merefield, "but it never occurs to him that his vile rags can have any effect abroad. Yet, if you say a thing often enough, it gets repeated. The French and the Russians are now beginning to ask what England's doing, what the Navy's thinking about, and why we don't do more. . . . Wolff's Bureau itself couldn't have a greater success than Woburn in making the French believe that we're sacrificing them to preserve our own trade. We've given America about as much ragging as she'll stand, and I want you to sweeten things. You do know the country."

I know enough of America to feel that she has always suffered, as Ireland suffers, from the characteristically English belief that because two people speak a similar language they must have an identic soul and that the Americans are a homogeneous Saxon race, estranged indeed from an equally homogeneous parent stock by a certain insolent independence imparted by General Washington to his turbulent followers, but Saxon in orientation and sympathy, essentially sound at heart. When Merefield asked me to go out, I knew that he could have found others better qualified for the work, but at least I was a man who never expected to find unanimity on the issues of European peace and war in New England, purest in Saxon blood and tradition, sensitive to every European repercussion and receptive of every

thought-wave borne across the Atlantic; in the Southern States, with their political concentration on the negro within their gates and the Mexican without; in the North-West, watchful of Canadian encroachments; in the Far West, with its eyes set on a Japanese peril; in the Middle West, where the farmer of Illinois and Iowa lives and dies without coming nearer than at a thousand miles' distance to Pacific or Atlantic; in scattered, unassimilated lumps of disaffected Ireland or duly prepared Germany.

"They're getting tired of hearing what 'America' ought to do," Merefield continued. "People here won't see that there is no American people yet, hardly an American idea, only the vaguest groping after an American ideal. They've been snapping and snarling at Wilson over Belgium, over the 'Lusitania', over his notes—as if he had a mixed population of a hundred and ten millions in his *pocket!* I want you to explain that it's only our fun. After all, they've got their own Woburns; they'll understand."

My American friends were too numerous to allow of my accepting Merefield's facile diagnosis and treatment. I knew then, as I had confirmed later, that the commonest feeling in the American mind was a quiet but affronted indignation at British ingratitude. Of the organisations, the funds and charities, the work of humanity and succour that had begun in America from the first day of war, not a word was said in our press or speeches; over the hardships and inconveniences involved by our blockade, over the sense of grievance occasioned by our censorship of mails and cables, no sympathy was expressed or felt. When Russia was dependent on American munitions, when English credit in America was the hope and salvation of allied finance, we could find no more gracious form of acknowledgement than a sneer at a so-called proud nation which let its sons and daughters drown without protest and shirked the sacrifices of war in order to steal trade, to sell the means of destruction to others and to increase the ever-mounting accumulation of wealth. I am too old and cosmopolitan to have any right to be surprised, yet I always am in fact surprised by

my countrymen's abysmal want of imagination and international courtesy. I approached my mission with the most unfeigned reluctance.

Merefield left me to think over his suggestion undisturbed, and before saying good-night I told him that, if he would give me a few weeks to order my affairs, I would gladly go for as long a time as the Foreign Office chose to keep me. Yolande and her husband had attended to my domestic requirements so admirably during my absence in Austria that I had no hesitation in entrusting them to her again and in surrendering the rest of my house for use as an office. My departmental work was gradually transferred to other shoulders, though at one moment I feared that the department itself was going to be extinguished. After dissipating numberless troops on secondary operations in every corner of the world except the western front, the Government found itself short of reinforcements for the great offensive which was to break the German line in the spring of 1916. The flow of volunteers was drying up, and I heard much excited gossip about an immediate measure of conscription. Grayle, I remembered, was very active and tried to commit me to an organised attack on the Government; as, however, even he admitted that no one but the Prime Minister could carry a compulsory service bill, I told him that he must be content with anything he could get. My department, or the younger section of it, was saved by a comic-opera compromise whereby volunteers were encouraged to enlist on pain of being conscribed, if they held back. To introduce a democratic note and make the figures imposing, all my youngsters were invited to attest; to ensure that the official machine continued in being, it was arranged that no government servant should be called to the colours without the leave of his departmental head. So, after a week's flutter, I was at liberty to go.

There was no secret about the fact of my mission, and Bertrand Oakleigh arranged a little dinner at the House to wish me good-speed. I walked back with him to his

rooms at "The Sanctuary" and looked into the library to see if there was anyone about. George was asleep on a sofa, but otherwise the room was deserted.

"I'm waiting to see Sonia," he yawned, as I came in. "With any luck she's out at a dance and won't be back till about four. I've induced Beresford to clear out, but I don't want her to be frightened or wonder where he is."

He broke off to yawn again. I asked him how he had contrived the eviction, and the yawn shortened into a smile.

"I didn't put it on the ground that he was falling in love with Sonia," he said, "because I suppose he knows that; I just told him that—a comment had been made. . . . D'you know, after that dinner, dear Lady Maitland called on me at ten next morning at the Admiralty, telling me to use my influence? And I may say that when Lady Maitland tells me to do a thing I do it. Well, Beresford is in the pulpy state where he'd cut his throat if he could protect Sonia's reputation in any way, little knowing the evergreen hardiness of that same reputation, and he went off to his own flat. Sonia will probably be very indignant with me this evening, but she's made her Peter much too lamb-like to be seriously interested in him any longer. Anyway, if she isn't indignant with me for one thing, she'll be indignant for another. And I seem to survive it comfortably. So *that* danger's over, though as a matter of fact there never was any danger. . . ." He filled a pipe and lurched wearily round the room in search of matches. "The only danger for Sonia is from a man who'll bully her," he drawled. "When she was engaged to Jim Loring, he behaved like an extra lady's maid; she might still be blowing hot and cold with Raney, if he hadn't shewn her very definitely who had the stronger will. It was at the very beginning of the war, and he was quite ruthless. . . . Last time he saw her, poor old Raney. . . ."

"You know them both pretty well, don't you?" I asked.

"Yes. And the next question is, why did they marry? I can't answer that. They were in love, but that's more a

reason than an excuse. . . . Yes, I've known 'em both for years. And for years I've tried to restrain Sonia's destiny when I saw it going to her head. Oh, by the way, Beresford's by no means my only success. I don't know whether Grayle's a friend of yours, but I dislike him—always did, when I was in the House with him—and the other day I thought it was time to interfere; you couldn't stir a yard without running into them. This time I didn't bother about approaching the man—that would have been too great a waste of time,—but I talked to Sonia until she promised never to have Grayle inside the house again and never to meet him of malice aforethought. Which you will admit is a fairly comprehensive victory."

He looked at his watch and walked impatiently to the writing-table.

"Mrs. O'Rane seems to be a whole-time job," I commented.

"She's all that," he grunted. "Mark you, I'm fond of her in spite of herself. . . . But I'm fonder of Raney, and the pair of them seem steering for disaster. . . . I don't know. I may be all wrong. I'm a bachelor and I've never had to humour a woman. . . . Here, I've finished this. I'll walk with you as far as the club."

As I latched the door behind me, I asked what he thought of the life which O'Rane had decreed for "The Sanctuary." He smiled before answering.

"If you'd known Raney as long as I have, it would be just the thing you'd expect of him—all taken *au grand sérieux,* too, of course. As for Sonia, she'd consent to sleep in a doss-house, if she were doing it for the first time—a new experience, you know. She was prepared to put up with anything, I fancy, to get away from home and have a house of her own; and she'd have cheerfully accepted half a room in a workman's cottage when she married Raney. After four or five months of it, I should think it's beginning to pall; the caravanserai life wouldn't suit her for twenty-four hours in the day, she likes it for

an hour after dinner—for more new experiences. I think, I *think* you'll find Raney will have to drop it. . . . But I don't know. . . . There are five things that are too hard for me, and the way of a maid with a man is the hardest of them all."

CHAPTER THREE

SONIA O'RANE

"Vanity induces men, more than reason, to act against inclination."
THE DUKE DE LA ROCHEFOUCALD: *Maxims.*

I

I SAILED for America in December, 1915, on perhaps the most difficult mission that I have ever undertaken. It was not expected, of course, that the United States would enter the war against us or upset the diplomatic equilibrium in our favour without provocation and until the result of the elections had been seen. I went, as I have suggested, to counteract the German propaganda, which sought to make all at least equally responsible for the war, and also to remove some part of the bad impression which had been left by our more unbridled journalists and our less imaginative statesmen. The moral approbation of America was too precious an asset to fritter away, and the purchase of material depended on the goodwill of American financiers, the supply of munitions could be stopped as a diplomatic reprisal.

It was perhaps unfortunate that my arrival coincided with an outburst of new interest in the Blockade, ending with the creation of a Blockade Ministry and the appointment of a Blockade Minister. (Harry Merefield used to shake his head over any new interest in the Blockade. "*We* always say that Germany must be defeated in the field, and I'm apprehensive when the soldiers tell me that they're counting on our starving the brutes out.") I was asked, too, at more than one meeting how the Government of Great Britain reconciled its passionate crusade in defence of small

nationalities with its no less passionate refusal to allow the Irish to control their own destinies. The dreary tale of the unchecked Ulster gun-running and the appeal to Germany was rehearsed for my benefit; and my more law-abiding Irish audiences generated considerable heat over the presence of "the rebel Carson" in the Cabinet.

But, if I found the work difficult, it gave me a respite from England, where I felt that I had been watching the machine at too close quarters. Since the day when I helped George Oakleigh to divide the world and secure a lasting peace, our nerves had worn thin; we devoted too much time to seeing that other people went promptly about their duties; and a deadly personal bitterness—embodied for me in Grayle, though I do not single him out for attack—poisoned our confidence in our own leaders. I was glad to feel the icy wind of the Atlantic lashing my face, blowing the cobwebs from my brain and the sour taste from my mouth, as we rounded the last Irish headland.

During the week that I had to myself on board, sailing without lights and zig-zagging out of reach of submarines, I put together the notes for some of my speeches. It was extraordinarily difficult to say anything definite. After eighteen months of hostilities and mid-way through a second winter, there was a confident expectation that the great spring offensive would end the war. The Austrian losses were known to be gigantic, and it was believed that the old emperor was flirting with peace; Germany was starving, and the moral of the German army had notoriously broken. (Our avowedly humorous publications demonstrated that a British soldier had still only to call "Waiter!" or to exhibit a sausage at the end of his bayonet to have a swarm of German prisoners on their knees to him.)

Yet, beneath all our confidence ran a chilling current of doubt. The spring offensive would be launched in Belgium or France, but the clubs and dinner tables, the military correspondents—it was whispered, the Cabinet itself—were divided into "westerners" and "easterners."

"If *we* could hold up the Huns at Ypres," George had

said to me gloomily on my last day in England, "*they* can hold us up equally well, when the proportion of fighting strength has been reversed. I hoped in the early days of the Dardanelles that we were going to knock away the buttresses and bring down the whole structure of the Central Empires, detach Turkey and Bulgaria, you know, carve a way into the Hungarian plains. Now I'm by no means comfortable. . . ."

George, with many others, was not destined to think of the Dardanelles with an easy mind until news reached the Eclectic Club one day at luncheon that Gallipoli had been miraculously evacuated, and a sigh of relief rose over London, to be followed by a feeling that, though we had escaped once, our luck might desert us at the second tempting. More and more I was hearing the criticism that there were too many amateur strategists in the Cabinet with no one to check the careless inspiration which led them to fling their armies to Sulva Bay or Salonica, while the thinning reserves on the western front impelled the Government inch by reluctant inch to conscription.

And every time that the Blockade bit deeper into the puffy German flesh, every time that the mark exchange fell, every time that the numbers of enemy killed, wounded, missing and prisoners satisfied our military ready-reckoners that the last reserves were under fire and that the inevitable collapse would ring and echo through the world within so many days or weeks, the enemy retaliated with the wriggle of a Japanese wrestler, flung his adversary away and surmounted him. Servia had been overrun by the effete, vanquished Austrians in October, Montenegro followed in January; we had sent troops to Gallipoli, because the western front was impregnable, we had withdrawn them because the eastern front was no less impregnable. Amateur strategy or political intrigue was now mysteriously dissipating more troops in Greece, and I was required later to square the allied landing in Salonica with the allied resistance to the German incursion into Belgium. To say that King Constantine had defaulted on his treaty obliga-

tions to Servia was venturesome but inadequate, for the terms of the treaty were unknown; it was common knowledge, on the other hand, that Great Britain had guaranteed the Greek constitution, by which foreign troops might only land at the invitation of king and parliament.

The public temper in England led me to expect one thing, crystallised by Vincent Grayle in a bet that, if we had not broken the German line by September, the Government and the Higher Command would have passed into ineffectual history.

"It's their last chance," were his parting words to me. "After all, you find a leak in your cistern, you get a plumber; if he can't mend it, God's truth, you get another plumber. You're likely to find considerable changes by the time you get back."

I think it was the taste left in my mouth by Vincent Grayle that I was most glad to have blown away by the north-east Atlantic wind.

I landed in New York to find that I had lost one false perspective of the war to acquire another. In the eastern states there was indeed an "American Rights" party, flamingly incensed that the President had not broken off diplomatic relations on the sinking of the "Lusitania," but as unprepared as I had been on my return to England after a year of war for the resolution and effort, the suffering and bereavement, the social upheaval and snapping nerves which I had met. New England, to my pity, talked of participation and still fancied, as we had once done, that it would be someone else's son or brother, someone of academic interest, who would appear day after day in the casualty lists. Yet what else could I expect? As I walked up and down the unfamiliarly lighted streets to see men still employed on work which was being done by women in England, as I met abundance on every hand and heard of war as an intellectual conception in the middle distance, I had only to shut my eyes and imagine that it was a fantastic nightmare of my own.

For three months I spoke and wrote; for three months,

as I was flung from end to end of the continent on journeys of incredible length and intolerable discomfort, interviewers boarded my train and invaded my car. The daily news of the war had long been relegated to some corner of a back page, and my interviewers were clamorous as children to be told a story.

I am content to be judged by results; in the south there were men who responded to my eloquence by crossing the border and enlisting in a Canadian regiment, and the War Charities Fund has its record of the subscriptions which I collected. My audiences reacted on me until I am afraid I came to idealise unpardonably. I remember describing to a Boston audience the spontaneous uprising of England as I had found it after a year abroad; I remember, too, returning to my hotel and finding a handful of letters and a batch of month-old papers. . . . England was agitated by the question whether a married man, who had volunteered for service, should be taken into the army until an unmarried man, who had not so volunteered, had been coerced. It was not an ennobling controversy for one who had been describing crusades. . . .

"It serves the married men right for calling the single men shirkers," George Oakleigh wrote. "Now that they've screwed themselves up to the point of attesting, they're trying to shirk in their turn. . . . Psychology is revealing itself curiously. Men who despise a Catholic for surrendering the right of private judgement are praying for the Government to order them about and relieve them of the responsibility of making up their own minds. . . . A thriving trade is being driven in rejection certificates. Your enterprising patriot with some physical defect gets himself duly turned down for the army; he then personates his more robust friends for a suitable fee, attending at their local recruiting offices under their names and pocketing any solatium that may be handed out at such times. It was hardly this spirit which sent Jim Loring and Raney out. . . . The whole wrangle is a great opportunity for our friend Beresford, but he is at least honest and intelligible;

if conscription comes, he'll refuse to serve, and the Government can shoot him. He was committed to a war without being consulted and he's not going to die of malaria in Salonica to please a House of Commons which he helped to return five years ago to carry the Parliament Bill."

I feel that I must have addressed my audiences with less conviction after a letter of this kind, yet it was but the occasional snapping of overstrained human nerves. Yolande, I remember, wrote in great concern to tell me that her husband and George—two of the kindest, mildest and most level-headed men I know—had quarrelled and parted in anger. A successful raid into the German lines was magnified into at least a second-class victory; George in a mood of depression minimised it unduly; Felix thereat raked up his opponent's record of eight years before as a champion of disarmament and international peace, charging him with being a pro-German. "I wanted to bang their heads together, uncle darling," my niece confided. "Will you believe it? They weren't on speaking terms for a week, until I made each apologise to the other. So ridiculous! . . ."

The unrest and dissatisfaction ran through public and private life equally.

"There's a perfect crop of what my young cousin Laurie calls 'stunt-artists' of late," George wrote a week later. "Every third man in the House feels called on to do a 'stunt' of his own. There's a 'Ginger Stunt,' to keep the Government up to the mark, and an 'Air Stunt,' to protect us from Zepps, and a 'Civil Liberties Stunt,' to resist conscription, and a 'Conscription Stunt,' to resist civil liberties, and a 'Press Stunt,' to quash the Press Bureau, and a sort of 'Standing Stunt' to quash Northcliffe. Men of imaginative bent are turning their eyes to Mesopotamia and the Dardanelles, ready to start stunts there at the earliest opportunity and on the smallest provocation. Bertrand says that in all his experience he's never known the House so neurotic and out of hand. The cumulative effect is exceedingly bad. Whether the stunts do any good or not I can't say, but

they destroy confidence in the Government, depress people at home and at the front, not to mention the allies, and ultimately they'll bring the Government down. Now, with the exception of Grayle, that's what no one wants to do. Asquith's the only man who can hold the country together, but he's so anxious—and rightly—to keep his team working harmoniously and to avoid any possibility of a split anywhere that I don't think he asserts himself enough. A party truce can be overdone, and a good many Liberals are saying that they are always sacrificed to conciliate someone else and never the other way about; as with Ireland—but I've no doubt your Irish-Americans have delicately hinted in the same sense. . . . By the way, I forgot to mention the 'Stop the War Stunt.' Since last I wrote Beresford has been had up and fined; at least he was ordered to pay the fine, but he refused; so they kept him in prison for a bit, and he hunger-struck and now he's at large again. . . ."

George's next letter made no reference to anything of public interest.

"Do you remember saying that Sonia was a whole-time job for a man?" he began. "She's too much for me; I'm going to retire from the fray. When Raney came home for the Christmas holidays, he and Sonia talked things over—Melton and the House and work of various kinds. Bertrand was dragged in to keep the peace and advise generally, and they reached this amount of agreement: Raney consented to throw up his appointment at the school, provided he found work at least equally remunerative to pay his debts and keep the household going and provided that it was work of some public utility. He wasn't prepared simply to make money, if his services could be of any use to anyone for the war. Well, as you know, almost every kind of public work involves the use of your eyes, and it would have taken him some time to find the right kind of job. In fact, he and Bertrand had not begun to discuss it when Sonia went on to the next question with a very definite statement that, if he was going to live at 'The

Sanctuary', she claimed equal rights with him to decide who was invited to the house—in other words (and very reasonably, from her point of view) the house was their home and she might just as well be living in the street as in that menagerie. I confess I sympathise. I *knew* she wouldn't stand it for more than a very few weeks. You don't know the place as I do, you've probably never seen anyone but Beresford dossing on a sofa, but Raney with the best intentions in the world sometimes turns that place into a casual ward. Sonia stood it at first, because it was a new experience and she's got a passionate enjoyment of life which would carry her through everything. But, when the novelty had worn off, it must have been singularly uncomfortable; even Raney's friends would only smile pityingly, and you may be sure that all the Dainton influence was thrown into the scale against him. I know for a fact that Lady Dainton's done all the mischief she can in the way of sneering, criticising, setting Sonia against Raney. The important new development was that Sonia was beginning to echo her mother. I happened to drop in about this time. I expect you've noticed that moral undressing is always conducted publicly in that house; I heard Raney defend himself by pointing out that Bertrand's house had been turned into a hospital, that Crowley Court was a hospital and that he was not asking Sonia to do anything very different from what Lady Dainton was doing. 'Ever since I came back from the front,' he told her, 'I've been trying to get this war into perspective. Everyone's doing his best to save this country and all that it stands for, but it's got to stand for a good deal more than it did before the war; we owe it to the fellows who have died and the fellows who are dying now and the numberless fellows who've still got to die, we've got to shew that they died for something that we can look at without shame. It'll be a long time before we can be really proud of this country, but we can make a beginning, and the time to begin is when we've stood sweating with fear and remorse with a halter

round our necks and the hangman comes to say we've been reprieved.'

"As you know, my uncle's a tough old cynic, but, when Raney talks with that cold, vibrant passion of his, you have to be very tough not to feel at least a little uncomfortable. I've had to stand it ever since we were at Oxford together. Sonia was about as much impressed as if he'd been talking to a brick wall. He wasn't discouraged, but he turned to Bertrand—'You remember when I got back, sir?' (God! I'm not likely to forget the night when we found he was blind!) 'You were in a furnished flat, and I had awful difficulty in finding you, but I came straight to you, and you and George took me in without a murmur.' (I suppose he thought that after sixteen years we were going to refer him to the nearest Rowton House.) 'That was—symbolical, sir,' he went on. 'D'you remember that you came in very late, when I was in bed, and we had a talk? After you'd gone, I got out of bed and lifted up both hands and swore that I'd not give in, that I'd do what I could with what was left. I swore that, as I'd been taken in—not only by you; a hundred other people had done the same,—I'd try very humbly and patiently never to say "no" to anyone else that wanted to be taken in, anyone else that I could help. That's what I'm trying to do now.' Then he stopped and left them to digest it, with the result which you can imagine when two people take up wholly irreconcilable positions. Sonia said that charity should begin at home, that he talked about not being unkind to anyone, but he was being unkind to his own wife—you can imagine the dialogue. Bertrand raised *his* two hands that night and swore that he'd clear out into quarters of his own, and Sonia's parting words were that she regarded her marriage as at an end, which is a pretty sentiment after five months."

A week later George wrote again on the same subject.

"How you must enjoy the sight of my hand!" he began. "I'm sorry, but I want to blow off steam. The other night I took Raney out to dinner and talked to him for his soul's good. I saw a good deal of the tragi-comedy when Sonia

was engaged to Jim Loring and I told Raney that he was courting disaster by the way he was treating her. He was in one of his most smiling, most obstinate moods—steel and india-rubber. He said he couldn't slam his door in the face of anyone who wanted help. 'Very well!' I said; 'keep it open. You say "yes," she says "no," and there's not a square inch of ground for compromise. One of you has to climb down, and you won't?' 'If you like to put it like that,' says Raney, 'I won't.' 'Then make *her,*' I said. 'She'll do it, if you make her; she won't love you any the less and she'll respect you all the more, if you force her to obey you.' Raney was really upset. 'Old man! you mustn't talk to me about *forcing* my wife to do things!' My dear Stornaway, that's the kind of imbecile we've got to deal with! I warned him that, if he kept his door open against her will, she would walk out of it.

"God knows, I never wanted to be a Cassandra, but I know that child so well! Two days later Raney bumped into a young officer staggering along Victoria Street in an advanced state of intoxication; Raney just had time to find out that the fellow was due to catch the leave-train at about seven next morning, when his new friend collapsed on the steps of the Army and Navy Stores and settled himself to a comfortable slumber. I don't suppose any of us would have left him there with a fair prospect of being robbed or run in or discovered by the Provost-Marshal, to say nothing of losing the train and perhaps being court-martialled. Raney must needs put him in a cab, take him home and expend time, ingenuity and hard-bought experience in making him sober. It must have been a gruesome night, but the fellow caught his train. It was the last straw for Sonia. The next day she wired from Northamptonshire, asking me to tell Raney that she was staying with the Pentyres. That was a week ago; Raney has asked her—*asked,* mark you—to come back, and she won't budge. I deliberately cadged an invitation from Pentyre last week-end, we spent Sunday with one scene after another, and her final message on Monday morning was that she would come back when he

agreed to do what she asked; otherwise she would be compelled to think that he, too, regarded the marriage as over. I spent most of Monday night storming at Raney, and the present position is that neither will yield an inch and Raney won't exercise his authority.

"You are probably sick and tired of them both by now, but you cannot be anything like as sick or tired as I am. . . ."

2

This was the last letter which I received before my return to England in the spring of 1916. The country, when I landed, reminded me strongly of a theatre before a first night; everyone was waiting for the full deployment of the new armies, everyone expected the summer campaign to be the supreme test; by now, too, almost everyone had son or brother under arms waiting in the line or rehearsing his share in the coming offensive. The tension produced a nervous irritability which manifested itself, so far as the House of Commons was concerned, in a mutinous demand for enlightenment, and one of my earliest duties was to be present, with fine parade of mystery and importance, at the first secret session of the war. The one unvarying rule which I have been able to frame for the House of Commons is that it never fulfils expectations. Though the Press Gallery was conscientiously cleared, we were given neither fact nor figure that was not already in the possession of any well-informed journalist; twenty-four hours later the speeches were common property in every club, and the one thing new was the change in psychology. The show of blind loyalty to the Government had broken down until the Government itself felt that something must be tried to restore confidence. I found that a man of Bertrand's temperamental independence was using Grayle's currency of speech.

"Much good it's done!" he growled, as we left the House together. "It's no use pointing to the number of men you've raised or the output of shells. The country's outgrown the

phase of being content with good endeavours, it wants *results,* it's in the mood to say, 'You haven't beaten the Germans, and, if you don't do it pretty quickly, someone must be found who will.' Stroll home with me, if you've nothing better to do."

"You're in your old quarters still?" I asked.

Bertrand laughed and then sighed.

"When David asked me to come here, I accepted on an impulse," he confessed. "It was a phase of the early enthusiasm; I felt we'd got no business to go on living so extravagantly, when the boys out there were going through Hell's agonies and every penny was wanted to carry on this war and to reduce the load of human suffering. I suppose this dog's too old to be taught new tricks. If you find me staying on now, it's only to keep the peace." He stopped to re-light his cigar, and, as he sheltered the match with his hands, I saw that his heavy, powerful face was morose and dissatisfied. "I've got a considerable love for David. He was a fool to marry the girl, of course, but a man doesn't marry or keep a mistress because it's *wise,* but because he wants to, because he can't help himself. . . . When she married him, I thought that the war had sobered her down, but these *soupers fraternels* have made her restive, and she's reverted to type. I'm standing by to break up tête-à-têtes and prevent her doing anything irrevocable before they've patched up their present quarrel and agreed on some possible way of life. If he weren't blind, she'd have left him three months ago. You know they've not met since Christmas?"

"Where are they?" I asked.

"Oh, she's here—with the usual tame cats to carry her off to lunch and dinner. She came back the day after David returned to Melton. . . . You can see it's a pleasant house to live in! . . . Before the war I sat on a committee with her mother. Do you remember a phase when young men tried to grow side-whiskers? Well, the drawing-room was always full of these hairy youths, immaculately dressed and simpering round her with boxes of sweets and flowers,

which she very graciously accepted. Since the war these fellows have shaved and got into uniform, but it's the same old gang. I used to think nobody was injured; she liked racketing about at restaurants and theatres, they were puffed up to be with her. The only man I drew the line at was Grayle; he's much heavier metal." Bertrand paused to laugh with his old cynical relish. "I'm deuced old, but I've still got a very retentive memory, and everybody's always told me things. Well, I went through the mental rag-bag, I talked to a few people, I made a few enquiries—particularly on the American chapter of his life—and the next time we met I became biographical at his expense. George tried and failed. Friend Grayle hasn't been here since. I tell you, I was getting sick of the business. She'd give a dinner party at eight, and Grayle would be here at half-past seven to talk to her alone, and, by Gad! she'd be dressed and ready for him. I don't know whether they thought I was blind *and* deaf. . . . And it was the same when she dined at his house. I used to hear her coquetting and threatening to be late, if he wasn't 'good'—ugh!—and he'd swear he wouldn't admit her, if she wasn't in time. It was all such poor stuff! I shouldn't have minded so much, if there'd been any red blood in it, but she was obviously just keeping her hand in; that woman would make sheep's eyes at the Shakespeare monument in Leicester Square sooner than nothing. . . . So I spiked friend Grayle's guns, and she's had to content herself with Beresford. He's pretty harmless, but the devil of it is that she's ready to go wrong with any man, when she loses control of her temper. If she weren't restrained by her husband's blindness . . . Good night. I'm going straight to my room."

As I had come to the door, I thought that I could do no harm by going in to see who was about. I found Beresford sitting up on a sofa with a block of paper on his lap. He looked exceedingly ill and perhaps not best pleased to see me.

"You're back again, then?" I said. "How's the knee?"

"I'm only waiting till Sonia comes in," he answered. "My

knee's much the same as it's been all along, very much the same as it always will be. The doctors are going to give me blood-tests or something. Of course, I didn't do it much good when I was in prison; the doctor there was badly scared. He used to examine me each day to see how much longer I could hold out without food, and I used to see him looking grave every time he came to the knee, until I'm prepared to bet he told the authorities he wouldn't take the responsibility of keeping me there any longer. Then they let me out." His grey lips curled into a withering sneer. "God! the authorities in this country *deserve* to lose their precious war! D'you think that in Germany they'd allow me to write the pamphlets I do here? D'you think, if they decided not to shoot me, they'd let me out of prison because they were afraid to force food down my throat? The blessed innocents here said I might go, if I promised to drop my propaganda; they brought in a pen and paper. Well, I'd been without water for four days, and my throat and mouth were so swollen that I couldn't speak. I couldn't write very elegantly, either, but I collected enough strength to scrawl 'I'll see you in Hell first.' And then, if you please, I was let out. And now I'm improving the occasion."

He collected a number of loose sheets and pinned them together.

"As long as you think it does any good," I said, "the Archangel Gabriel wouldn't be able to stop you."

"You don't think it's a good thing to keep people from slaughtering one another? Dear man, d'you appreciate that, if Kitchener and Grey were in Potsdam at this moment with the unconditional surrender of Germany in their pocket, they couldn't get anything to compensate our present losses? There's imbecile talk about security and a 'war-to-end-war,' but you won't *have* war when people understand what it's like. That's what I'm trying to shew them."

He threw himself back on the sofa and began reading what he had written. I got up to leave, only pausing to give him a message for Mrs. O'Rane. As I closed the door

behind me, a taxi stopped at the corner twenty yards from "The Sanctuary" and a man in uniform stepped out and stretched one hand to somebody inside, holding the door open with the other. His size alone, without the familiar mane of yellow hair, identified him for me as Grayle; a moment later Mrs. O'Rane emerged and stood by him under the street lamp at the corner. Bertrand might keep Grayle as far away as the end of the street, but I felt that he had boasted prematurely.

"You'll come in?" I heard Mrs. O'Rane say, as her companion hesitated by the taxi.

"Not to-night, thanks. It's rather late."

I caught a light ripple of laughter.

"You're not getting suddenly anxious about my reputation, are you?" she asked. "You *used* to *like* coming in and talking to me; and you know how I hate going to bed. Of course, if you don't want to——"

Grayle opened his case and took out a cigarette.

"That cuts *no* ice, Sonia," he said. "Good-night and thank you for coming. I shall see you to-morrow."

"I don't think I shall come."

"Oh, yes, you will."

"If you're so afraid of being compromised——"

"You are coming to-morrow."

She was silent; and, if it had been day-light, I would have staked my life that she was pouting suitably.

"You *used* to say that to-morrow was a very long way off," she remarked irrelevantly.

Grayle's voice became authoritative.

"You are coming to-morrow, Sonia."

No doubt it was the old small change of flirtation which had exasperated Bertrand, and I had already been made to hear more than I relished. Stepping into the circle of dim light, I bade her good evening and asked Grayle if he had finished with his taxi.

"Hul-*lo!* I didn't know you were back in England!" she cried. "Have you been calling? I wish I'd known. You've got to come back now."

"I looked in for a moment," I said. "Now I must get home, though."

"I'll give you a lift," Grayle volunteered.

Mrs. O'Rane looked from one to the other of us, and her eyes and mouth hardened in an expression of pique.

"My society seems rather at a discount to-night," she observed.

"You'll find Beresford waiting for you," I said. "I've been talking to him, but I've got to get home now."

She turned to Grayle, and I will swear that she was watching to see if Beresford's name was a challenge.

"I must get home, too," was all that he would say. "I shall see you to-morrow."

"Oh, I meant to tell you. I can't come to-morrow," she answered with easy gravity, as though I had not heard every syllable of her earlier conversation. "Well, if you won't come in, I'll say good-night. Thanks for a most delightful evening."

Grayle and I drove in silence for half of the way. Then he asked me abruptly how I had got on in America.

For some weeks I continued to attend to my own work uninterrupted by the O'Ranes, but towards the end of the Easter term I had to make my way to Melton for the Governors' meeting. A note from O'Rane invited me to call before going back to London, and at the end of our business I invaded his rooms to find him seated, as ever, cross-legged on the floor with his head thrown back, lips parted and eyes seemingly fixed on the ceiling or on something beyond it. The room was crowded with what I can only call a cluster of boys sprawling on chairs and tables or precariously perched with linked arms on the broad mantelpiece. Some were conventionally dressed, some were in flannels, some in uniform; the majority, however, preferred a motley of khaki breeches, puttees and vivid blazers. It was the end of a field day, and a few of O'Rane's friends had dropped in to talk with him. After some moments it occurred to the boy nearest the door to ask if I wished to

speak to Mr. O'Rane, and on that, to my regret, the seminar dissolved.

As the last boy clattered into the Cloisters, O'Rane felt for a box of cigarettes and asked me how I had got on in America.

"George told me you were back," he said. "Have you been round to our place?"

"I went round there almost immediately," I told him. "I say, O'Rane——"

Perhaps he guessed what was coming, for I was not allowed to finish my sentence.

"Was Beresford there?" he asked.

I hesitated for what I should have thought was an imperceptible moment; and O'Rane repeated his question.

"As a matter of fact he was," I said.

"Ah! I wish I'd known that before. . . . Oh, *now* I see why you hesitated!" He gave a buoyant laugh. "I can assure you that Beresford doesn't make me in the least jealous or in the least apprehensive. I'd trust him pretty well as far as I'd trust Sonia; our outlook's so similar, we've got so much in common. Well, the authorities have got their eyes on him, and he'll find himself arrested again, if he isn't careful. And he's only alienating possible sympathisers with the stuff he's writing now. Did you read him on the typhus outbreak at Wittenburg?"

He jumped up and brought me a copy of "The Watchman" from his writing-table. Beresford's article made me very angry. A few days earlier my nephew Felix, dining with me at the Hyde Park Hotel, where I had now taken up my residence, had given me a sickening account of the epidemic in the prisoners' camp; a fuller and yet more sickening account had appeared in the Press, and from end to end of the country there burst a storm of indignation stronger than anything since the outcry against the atrocities in Belgium. At this moment and from this text Beresford, who saw red at the news of the mildest cruelty to man or animal, preached a cynical, superior sermon to prove that, if misguided fools went to war, this was the kind of

thing they must expect. The object of war was to kill, and the only reason why the Germans did not massacre their prisoners was that on balance their own losses might be greater. But in scientific warfare it was unjustifiable to expect German doctors and nurses to risk their lives for the sake of preserving the enemy's. The English might; the English habitually boasted of picking up survivors after a naval engagement, but it was not war.

"God knows *I'm* not in love with war," said O'Rane, as I flung the paper away, "but an article like that infuriates just the decent-minded people he's appealing to. Well, bad taste is not an indictable offence, but I had a hint dropped this week-end that made me think that Beresford had better go warily. We had a man dining in Common Room on Sunday whose job in life is to advise on people like him and the stuff they turn out. We got on to the Wittenburg article, and it came out that I knew the author. Well, there was nothing much the matter with that branch of Intelligence Service; they knew all about Beresford, but they didn't want to give him a free advertisement and make a martyr of him, so they tried to get hold of him under the Military Service Act and stop his mouth that way. He was ordered to join up on a certain day, so he wrote a polite letter to say that he disapproved of war and did not propose to fight. When the day came, he was well and duly put in charge of a guard and marched off to the recruiting office to be presented to the army and turned into a soldier. Before that could be done, though, the doctors had their say. To cut it short, he was rejected rather more completely than anyone's ever been rejected before—heart, lungs, knee. . . . One doctor told him that if he didn't live in the open air and blow himself out with milk, he'd be dead in six months. That was a week ago. The army's been cheated of its prey, and my friend of Sunday night must find another means of stopping Beresford's mouth. What the fellow must understand is that they intend to catch him this time; their temper's none the better for the little rebuff at the recruiting office. I was meaning to come up

and talk to him at the next Leave-Out, but I'm afraid he may put his head in the trap before I can get at him. That's why I asked you to come and see me; I want you to take him in hand."

After the Wittenburg article I was not inclined to raise a finger on Beresford's behalf. And so I told O'Rane.

"But do you want him to die?" he asked. "If they shove him in prison and he hunger-strikes again, you may never see him alive."

"I think I could endure that," I said. "The man's mind is perverted."

"Ah, then, you mustn't treat him as if he were normal," O'Rane put in quickly. "I want you to go to him and tell him to drop the whole business. Lord knows, I've been up against authority in one form or another most of my life, but there's nothing heroic in getting shot, if you don't achieve anything by it. You can get him to see that, surely."

By this time I confess that I had become one of many who found it hard to refuse O'Rane anything; perhaps it was because he never asked for himself.

"I'll try,—as a favour to you," I said. "Though I've no idea why I should want to do you a favour. O'Rane, you're making a considerable mess of your life."

The expression on his face suddenly changed, and he became courteously unapproachable.

"Do you think we shall do any good by discussing it?" he asked.

"Every day that you let slip makes it harder to mend the breach. This term's running out. What are you going to do in the holidays?"

"I'm going home."

"To the sort of doss-house life that you led before?"

"I—suppose so."

I put on my coat and started towards the door.

"Your wife will leave you," I warned him.

"I've told her—and I believe I told you—that I'd never keep her against her will."

"My friend, you are making a great fool of yourself."

O'Rane opened the door for me, and we passed into the Cloisters.

"I didn't think we should do any good by discussing it," he said.

3

If I could have persuaded anyone else to carry O'Rane's warning to Beresford, I would have done so, but old Bertrand and George had crossed to Ireland for a week's fishing, and, when I called on Mrs. O'Rane in the hope of catching her for ten minutes in a serious mood, it was my ill-luck to choose the night before Pentyre went out to the Front. An impromptu dance was taking its noisy course, and the only satisfaction which I derived from the visit was my discovery that the estrangement was not yet common property. Indeed, Mrs. O'Rane was fortunate in that her behaviour, however outrageous, was judged and condoned by a special standard. "That's so like darling Sonia," Lady Maitland and her like would say. I took the trouble to pump young Deganway, whom I personally dislike, but even his long nose had not scented a scandal. It never seemed to dawn on Sir Roger and Lady Dainton that anything was amiss; they both disapproved of O'Rane, they both felt, without taking the trouble to disguise their feelings, that Sonia had disappointed their ambitions and was wasting her life; but with a curious timidity or survival of self-respect Mrs. O'Rane never let her own relations see that eight months after her marriage she was in effect separated from her husband.

Failing to transfer my burden to other shoulders, I drove one night to Sloane Square and ran Beresford to earth in his rooms at the top of a modest block of service flats. There was no lift, and I was out of breath and temper by the time that I had climbed eight flights of stairs and lost myself in an uncharted maze of stone-flagged passages. At last, with a stitch in my side, I found his name painted on a wall and leaned helplessly against the door, as I looked for the bell. The door yielded unexpectedly, and I found myself

stumbling into an unlighted passage, where a phosphorescent rectangle hinted at a second door. Groping for the handle, I knocked and entered. Beresford was lying in an arm-chair with the injured leg on a coffin-stool and a reading lamp on a rickety oriental table behind him. In semi-darkness the room was youthfully bizarre. There were low cases, filled with paper-labelled books, running round three walls, a window with a divan under it in the fourth, Japanese silk hangings above the book-cases and praying mats insecurely scattered on an over-polished floor. The furniture consisted of a red lacquer cupboard, chest and clock; in one corner a Buddha smiled from behind folding doors with placid and baffling benevolence; a discoloured Moorish lamp hung from the middle of the ceiling with the Hand of Welcome outstretched to support it; a joss-stick in a porcelain vase on the mantel-piece smouldered fragrantly.

At the creak of the door's opening, Beresford raised himself abruptly in his chair and as quickly subsided.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

"I didn't see any bell, so I walked in," I told him. "Are you busy?"

Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at the table beside him. There was neither paper nor book to offer plausible protection.

"I didn't look for this honour," he said with a slight sneer. "I was—as a matter of fact—thinking out an article,—thing I've got to finish to-night, you know." I sniffed—disapprovingly, I fear—the close, rather sickly atmosphere and loosened my coat. "It's a few reflections on the anniversary of the 'Lusitania,'" he went on, in a tone of challenge, "pabulum for thoughtful Yanks. Do you want to see me about anything in particular? I—I've got to get this finished to-night."

His theme gave me my cue, and I furnished him with a digest of my conversation with O'Rane. He heard me out, impatiently but without protest.

"I'm sure it's very kind of you both," he said at length, "but I'm afraid it's no use. We should never have had this

war, if a few other people had done what I'm doing instead of blathering about peace and disarmament in a sixpenny review, like young Oakleigh, and throwing everything to the winds the moment war was declared. I appreciate your coming, all the same——"

He pulled himself upright and limped to the lacquer cupboard, from which he took out a writing-block and pad. I was ready and anxious to leave as soon as I had delivered myself of my message, but—petty as it may seem—I resented his hunting me out of his flat quite so unceremoniously; hitherto I had perched on the arm of a chair; I now lowered myself with an obstinacy unbecoming my age into its depths.

"But surely you can see that it's no good trying to separate fighting dogs when once they've got to work? That's why George brought his paper to an end. You've got to wait for a decision of some kind."

"We reached a decision when the Germans were checked at the Marne," he yawned, pulling back his sleeve to consult the watch on his wrist.

"But that's over and done with. Any peace efforts now only have the effect of weakening our own endurance and making a German victory the one possible decision."

"But you know as well as I do that there's going to be no military decision. If they couldn't break through our line, we can't break through theirs, and I want to stop this hideous slaughter on both sides. I want to make people see that they must get Wilson or the Pope to propose terms of arbitration." The pupils of his eyes suddenly dilated. "And that's what I shall go on saying. I'm not going to be persuaded by you, I can't be intimidated by the militarists, and I won't share your responsibility for future bloodshed, I won't join in this criminal nonsense about crushing Prussian militarism—humiliating Germany until you've made sure of another war in ten years' time. I think I've told you what the next war will be like." His voice had risen almost to a scream; with an effort he controlled himself, snorted

disgustedly and limped to the sofa where I had laid my hat and cane, considerately picking them up for me.

I moved towards the door. As I did so, my ears caught the sound of a low whistle, followed in the ensuing silence by a light step and the rustle of silk clothes from the flagged passage outside the front door. At last I understood why it had been left open, why the industrious Beresford was unoccupied on my arrival, why he had given me so many encouragements to retire. An unexpected sense of male freemasonry made me sorry for him. There was but the one door to the room, and already the rustle had passed from the passage outside and was audible in the dark corridor where I had fumbled for the handle twenty minutes before. Beresford stared before him with tragic eyes and parted lips; he grasped my wrist and let it fall again; then the door opened, and I could hear a double quick intake of breath.

Mrs. O'Rane was standing on the threshold in a black dress with an ermine coat open at the neck, an artificial pink rose in her hair and a cluster of them at her waist. One hand in a white glove circled with a platinum watch-bracelet rested on the finger-plate, and she smiled at Beresford demurely. The smile grew fixed and then faded when she saw who bore Beresford company; with unfeigned admiration I saw her collecting herself and preparing an offensive.

"Are you better?" she asked, coming into the room as though she were paying an afternoon call. "Good evening, Mr. Stornaway. Peter's not been at all well, and I promised to come and talk to him. I hope I'm not interrupting you; I'm rather before my time." She glanced at her watch, laid her hands on Beresford's shoulders and gently impelled him towards his chair. "Darling Peter, how often have I told you that you mustn't stand? Sit down like a good boy, put your foot up and tell me how you got on with the doctor."

She seated herself on the arm of his chair, waved me to another and threw open her coat.

"They took the blood-tests," said Beresford, gallantly try-

ing to imitate her nonchalance. "I'm to lie up and not to work. . . . At least, those are the orders."

Bending over him, she touched his forehead with her lips.

"And you're going to obey them," she said.

Beresford shrugged his shoulders sullenly.

"What good will it do?" he demanded.

"It will please me," she answered promptly. "Lady Maitland says that all I want is love, ten thousand a year and my own way. I don't want you to die, Peter mine."

He looked at her and turned his head resignedly away.

"I feel sometimes I've not got a great deal to live for," he sighed.

She jumped up with a show of indignation.

"You dare say that, when I've outraged Colonel Grayle by leaving his party to come and sit with you! Never again, my Peter! If you think so little of having me here——"

"It would be better for him and more seemly for you to drop this kind of thing," I suggested.

She looked at me with her head on one side and then swung slowly round to Beresford.

"I believe he's right, you know, Peter. I come here radiating sunniness, but I only seem to depress you. Shall I give you up, baby?"

"You think that will make me less depressed?" he asked gloomily.

"I feel I'm a bad habit." Her expression lost its smile and became charged with abrupt neurotic irritability. "You've had more of my time, more of my sweetness——"

"Do you think I don't appreciate that?"

"I ought never to have let you fall in love with me. Mr. Stornaway's quite right. It's all my fault, and the sooner I end it the better. Good-bye, Peter. It was a mistake, but I'm not ungrateful. When I was miserable, when I wanted sweetness——"

Beresford jerked himself erect and caught her arm, as she tried to get up.

"You're not going?" he begged.

"Yes. And I'm never coming back."

"God in Heaven! Sonia! Don't say that!"

For perhaps the fourth time that night I picked up my hat and cane. However little I might care for Beresford, common humanity ordained that this kind of game should end.

"This fellow's an invalid," I reminded her. "You're only making him worse by exciting him. You had better let me see you home. Taxis are few and far between, and I took the precaution of telling mine to wait."

She turned her little platinum watch to the light and compared it with the clock on the mantel-piece.

"I can get a train, you know," she told me, losing all her irritability and becoming matter-of-fact. "And I hate going to bed more than anything in the world except getting up. When we had a house in Rutland Gate my first season, Lord John Carstairs who lived next door always used to say that he knew it was time for breakfast when he heard my taxi bringing me home after a ball. So nice to feel that one sometimes really does one's duty to one's neighbour; it justifies the church catechism. He was very grateful about it and, whenever I lost my latch-key, he used to come down and help me in through the fan-light. Then there was a dreadful day when I got stuck on a piece of broken glass—father's bill for fan-lights was so heavy that we couldn't take a moor that year; he always thought it was the suffragettes—and Lord John stood below in the divinest green silk pyjamas and an Austrian military cloak, I lay half-way through the fan-light, we exhausted every possible topic of conversation, including the Academy, and at last he proposed to me. I've never been so angry in my life! If he'd proposed first and talked about the Academy afterwards, nobody could have minded."

Having prattled herself into a good temper, she paused to take a cigarette from a gold case at her wrist. I reminded her that we had lost sight of the particular in the general.

"It is late," I said. "Too late for you to be calling on

young bachelors and far too late to be left unchaperoned."

Her big brown eyes, usually soft and entreating, gave forth a glint of defiance.

"Dear Mr. Stornaway! If you knew how often I'd been to see Peter——"

"That makes it no better."

"You think I'm not respectable," she exclaimed with the slightest perceptible toss of the head.

"I've other things to think about. If you want to call on Beresford, you can call in the day-time; your only reason for choosing an hour of this kind is that you think there's something rather venturesome and improper about it. It's this sort of behaviour that led me on a famous occasion to tell you that you were second-rate."

Possibly acting on a hint from George Oakleigh, I was beginning to share his experience that Mrs. O'Rane never resented a certain brutal candour of criticism.

"You do hate me, don't you?" she laughed.

"I have no use for the second-rate."

"And that disposes of me!" She leant down and drew Beresford to her until his head was pillowed on her bosom. "Baby, you're in love with a second-rate woman. So are ever so many people more, I'm afraid. It doesn't speak highly for the first-rate intelligence of men, but then I take men as I find them."

"Pardon me, you go out to look for them, Mrs. O'Rane," I said.

"It's the same thing."

"Not for a married woman."

We had bantered hitherto without very much malice, but my reminder seemed to carry a sting.

"I don't regard myself as a married woman," she said very deliberately.

"I cannot remain out of bed to hear stuff of this kind!" I exclaimed. "Melodrama is only excusable when it is convincing."

"Don't you be too sure that you won't be convinced!" she cried, springing up and facing me. The ermine coat, droop-

ing half off her arms and back, fell to the ground and left her bare-shouldered and with heaving breast. The rose in her hair trembled, and two normally pale cheeks were lit each with a single spot of burning colour. The weakness that underlay the softness of her mouth had vanished, and her eyes, grown angry and hot, had lost their beauty. "Will you come and see me, I wonder, when I'm living with Peter?" she asked flauntingly.

"I shall not," I answered. "I may say that this kind of talk——"

"But you wouldn't mind seeing him?" she interrupted. "This is all right in a *man*. David can go off with that woman——"

"Good-night, Mrs. O'Rane," I said, holding out my hand.

Like everyone else, I sometimes feel intuitively when people are speaking for effect. Mrs. O'Rane spoke purely for effect when she boasted of the times that she had been to call on Beresford; she was still speaking for effect when I warned her against being melodramatic, yet sincerity crept in when she referred to her husband. I hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry. For her to be jealous of Hilda Merryon presupposed that she was not so indifferent to O'Rane as she pretended; even to feign suspicion argued an unbalanced mind.

"Good-night," I repeated, as she stood ostentatiously refusing to take my hand. "You had better let me see you home, though."

"I'm not coming home. I won't be ordered about! You advise me and find fault with me and insult me. . . . Mr. Stornaway, let me tell you this. You've been—poking your nose into my affairs for some time, so I'm sure you've a right to know everything. You side with David and think everything he does is wonderful, perfect, magnificent. Well, I don't. I know I'm vain; and I'm vain enough to think he's not treating me as I'm entitled to be treated. He'll be coming home in a fortnight. I wrote to him to-day and asked him if he wanted to see me. If he does, he can. If he wants me and not the scourings of the London

streets. . . . If not, if he doesn't love me enough for that, I shall look for someone who does."

I ended my succession of unsuccessful starts and reached the door. Mrs. O'Rane strode after me with arms akimbo.

"You don't believe it!" she cried passionately. "You don't think I dare!"

"My dear young lady, in your present mood you're capable of most things," I said. "But Beresford and I are going to forget what you've been saying to-night, and I think you'll be glad to forget it, too."

4

One says rhetorically that one will forget a phrase or an episode, but my single glimpse of Mrs. O'Rane's temper had frightened forgetfulness away. I kept on telling myself that it was no business of mine, that my rule for thirty years had been to let the younger generation take care of itself untrammelled; yet, when George Oakleigh telephoned to me from the Admiralty, begging me to cancel other engagements and dine with him, I had to prepare myself for any kind of bad news.

I could see, when he came into the club, that there was something on his mind, but we had no opportunity for private conversation during dinner, as Maurice Maitland attached himself to our table for first-hand news of the Irish rebellion. I had imagined that George, even with an Irish estate, an Irish upbringing and an unmixed Irish ancestry, was too much overlaid with his English associations to feel more than academically on the Irish aspirations. To see him after a holiday in Ireland, where he had gone to fish and had never stirred nearer the county Kerry than Dublin, was to see a hillsman made suddenly mindful of the hills and of his own infancy. Forgotten fires of racial love and antagonism had been blown into life. There was no attempt to be judicial; he had arrived too late for the rebellion (or I dare swear he would have had a hand in it), he was not concerned with the bloodshed

which it had caused; it was the sight and stories of the repression which made his blood boil and his voice ring.

"So much for Skeffington!" he cried. "And Casement prosecuted by Smith, who threatened exactly the same tactics before the war! My God! I wonder when you English think this will be forgotten! You've seen the sentences? One woman was carted off to penal servitude for life. 'For life' one of her friends kept saying. 'But Ireland was free for three days,' answered the woman. We've a rare palate for phrases in Ireland. How soon do you imagine that phrase will be forgotten? I'm seeing red at this moment. For two pins I'd join our young friend Beresford in any propaganda against this country that he cared to start." Then he caught sight of Maitland's expression of shocked perplexity. "I mean it, General. When the Huns pretend to be amazed that the Belgians don't eat out of their hands, we're righteously disgusted at the hypocrisy of it. On my honour, you English are every bit as dense or hypocritical with us."

"But the trouble is over now, surely?" Maitland unwarily asked.

"It will never be over in your lifetime or mine! Redmond made the old blunder of trusting the English, he promised a united front in Ireland, when the war broke out, instead of holding the government to ransom. And the government responded by scrapping the Home Rule Act. You've lost Ireland, the Nationalist party's dead and damned, henceforth you'll have a swelling Sinn Fein army held down by English troops—as in Poland, as in Alsace-Lorraine, as in north Italy before the liberation. And I don't envy you the job of making things sweet with America."

Dinner was over before our discussion of Ireland, but, when Maitland left us to return to the War Office, the interruption changed the current of George's thoughts. I was not sorry, for I had endured two nights of Irish debate with Grayle, who saw in the rebellion fresh proof

of governmental incompetence and new need for a change in which I was to assist him.

"I didn't ask you here to listen to me tub-thumping," George began apologetically, when we were alone. "How lately have you seen anything of the O'Ranes?"

I told him of the meeting in Beresford's flat.

George smiled wanly.

"They'll kill poor old Bertrand between them," he said, "if they keep up this racket much longer. Raney wrote to say that he was coming home as soon as term was over and expected Sonia to be at 'The Sanctuary,' and a couple of days later the Merryon woman arrived with the greater part of the luggage and a box or two of books. She hadn't come to stay, but he'd sent her up to verify a few references in his library for some work he was doing; she was going back to help him finish off his exam-papers and reports, and they were coming up together in about a week's time. This took place yesterday. Now, I'll say at once that Raney's behaved like a psychological ostrich over that woman, and nobody but Raney would have thought it anything but outrageous for a man to let his wife stay in London and calmly accept the services of a secretary—in his wife's place and against her wishes. She'd put her eyes on sticks for him, too, Miss Merryon would; and, if Raney doesn't know it, you bet Sonia does. Well, I think it was partly jealousy; Sonia was furious at the idea of anyone else being near her husband. Partly it was shame; when the girl came in with Raney's belongings, arranging this, ordering that, verifying the other, you may be sure that Sonia knew very well that she was letting someone else do her job. And partly it was because she couldn't get her own way. The combined result was a first-class row, in which she said that the girl was Raney's mistress and told her that she wouldn't have her in the house. It wasn't mere words. She escorted her to the door, where the taxi-man was wrestling with the luggage, slammed it behind her and pulled a chest against it. On the business principle of having everything in black and

white, she then wrote a descriptive account of it all to Raney, which will no doubt be read aloud to him at breakfast to-morrow by Miss Hilda Merryon."

He mopped his forehead and sent a waiter to fetch him some water.

"And what are you doing?" I asked.

"What *can* I do? Raney's not going to be told that this woman's his mistress; he'll probably make Sonia apologise to them both—or try to; and he certainly won't let her be turned out. I should think . . . I don't know, but I should think that, on the day he comes back, Sonia will try to run away again, and, if he doesn't stop her by main force, by using all the authority he's got and all the brutality he's capable of exhibiting, he'll lose her for good. Sonia's pretty well worked up, too. So am I. These young people are preparing an early grave for me; it's getting on my nerves."

"But her parents—" I began.

My unfinished suggestion was received with a silent smile, which was perhaps the cruellest and most comprehensive criticism ever passed on Sir Roger and Lady Dainton.

I was in the smoking-room at the House the following night, talking to Vincent Grayle, when George's card was brought in, and I went out to see him.

"I've just left 'The Sanctuary,' " he said. "And I thought I'd report progress. Raney got her letter all right and sent very much the reply I should have expected. *He's* pretty well worked up now. Sonia's *got* to apologise, and he *orders* her to receive Miss Merryon. It was an ultimatum, if there ever was one. Sonia— she was like I remember her the last time we met before she broke off her engagement with Jim Loring—every nerve tingling. She stalked to the telephone and rang up Beresford, informing me over her shoulder that she would not have *that woman* in the house, even if she had to bring friends in to turn her out. Fortunately Beresford was not at home. Then she rang up this place and tried to get hold of Grayle

—'Mrs. O'Rane. *Most* urgent.' Again, fortunately, the reply came back that Grayle was engaged——"

I looked at my watch and interrupted him to ask when the message had been sent.

"Oh, this moment—half an hour ago. It was just before I left to come here. Well, we're likely to have the pretty scene of Rahey driving up to the door and finding himself barricaded out by his own wife. Beresford can't do anything very active, but Grayle——"

"You needn't fear him," I said.

When the telephone message was brought into the Smoking-Room, Grayle glanced at the paper and said that he was engaged. I did not know, of course, who was trying to speak to him, but the messenger repeated that the call was *"most urgent."* At this Grayle grew impatient and said again and very deliberately, "I—am—*engaged."* Then we resumed our interrupted conversation; he was crossing to France almost immediately on a visit to General Headquarters and would be away for several days. He had promised to introduce a deputation of his constituents to one of the Ministers and wanted me to act for him in his absence.

"She's gone just too far with him," I said, "and he's lost his temper. But there mustn't be a scene, whatever happens. You'd better tell O'Rane to see you before he goes home; explain the state of mind she's in. . . . And, George, for the love of Heaven, get hold of Mrs. O'Rane and knock some sense into her head—you say she'll stand a good deal from you. This is becoming frankly intolerable."

Then we left the House; he made his way to "The Sanctuary," while I drove home. Had we changed places, he would have been more successful in his mission, for, as I paid off my driver, Mrs. O'Rane hurried up and engaged him. Whether she recognised me or not I cannot tell; but I had nothing to say to her and I was at pains to avoid an encounter. She was in evening dress, I remember, walking eastwards along Knightsbridge, and I wondered sudden-

ly whether she had been calling on Grayle in Milford Square. Then I remembered that Grayle was still at the House, when I left. As the taxi drove away I asked myself, not for the first time, whether I had not enough work and worries of my own without having to play the double part of bland bachelor uncle and private detective.

A week later O'Rane came up to London and called on George at the Admiralty. He was so far amenable to advice that he went alone to "The Sanctuary" and talked for an hour with his wife, though they parted without reaching a compromise and on the reiterated understanding that, if Miss Hilda Merryon set foot in "The Sanctuary," Mrs. O'Rane would leave and never return. I met him myself later in the day at the House and was relieved to find him preoccupied with other cares. He had called on Beresford and been privileged to hear the proofs of that indefatigable pamphleteer's latest composition. It was entitled, I believe, "Lettres de Cachet," and contained a bitter attack on petty tyranny and misuse of authority as practised by the army. O'Rane had tried to get the article withdrawn, but Beresford was inflamed and fanatical with memories of his own treatment in prison and of the attempt to silence his mouth by the exercise of military discipline. I fancy, too, that he was puffed up with his own initial victory and believed that, so far from seeking opportunity for another encounter, the agents of government were rubbing their bruises and keeping out of the way.

"I couldn't move him an inch," O'Rane had to admit. "I'm sorry, for I don't want to see him killed. . . . And I—I must have been extraordinarily like him when I was a kid of about fifteen, and the whole world was a black dungeon of iniquity and injustice, and I had to keep hold of myself with both hands for fear of murdering someone. . . . The first time I talked to Beresford I agreed with most of what he said; I could feel myself going white, if you understand me; we got emotionally drunk together. And then I saw that he wasn't going to do any more good than I should have done at fifteen, if I'd yielded to the

impulse of killing a man. . . . I felt that, if someone could relieve the shadows a bit . . . I'm not giving in yet."

We were interrupted by a division bell, and I gave him an arm to the lobby. Then Bertrand carried him off to dinner, and I made my way to the Berkeley, where I had promised to meet George and his cousin, Lady Loring. Arriving a few minutes before my time, I was smoking a cigarette in the hall when I caught sight of Grayle and crossed over to speak to him. He was scowling in an arm-chair facing the door, with his eyes impatiently fixed on his watch and an evening paper on his knees.

"You've not started yet, then," I said. "If you're going to be in London to-morrow, I'll give you back your deputation."

"I leave the first thing in the morning," he answered shortly. "What d'you make the time? Five to eight? On the stroke of eight I leave. I don't wait *more* than half an hour for any woman."

He hesitated for a moment longer; then pulled himself slowly erect and limped with the resolute fixity of ill temper to the cloak-room. I picked up the paper and was beginning to read it, when he limped back with his coat and cap on, buttoning his gloves.

"If Mrs. O'Rane turns up while you're here, give her that, will you?" he said, throwing an open envelope on the table. "You might say that I've gone on."

Protruding from the envelope was a theatre ticket.

"Aren't you dining?" I asked.

"I had a whiskey and soda while I was waiting," he answered. "Can't hang about indefinitely, you know. It's Eric Lane's new play. The thing starts at eight of all ungodly hours, and I want to see some of the show." I thought it unnecessary to remind him that we had met at the identical theatre some ten days before. "If a woman can't have the decency to come in time—Ah!"

He interrupted himself as Mrs. O'Rane came in, stood looking round for a moment and hurried forward, smiling at two or three friends on the way.

"*You* were very nearly late," she said, nodding at his cap. "If I'd had to wait—Well, I suppose Mr. Stornaway would have taken pity on me, however much he hates me. The spectacle of a young distressed female simply fainting for a cocktail—did you remember to order my special cocktail?" she asked Grayle.

"You are late," he observed, without regard to her question.

"I? But that's too abominable! If you're not going to be sweet to me, I shall go straight home and never speak to you again. Late, indeed! I didn't get home till after seven, but I had a hot bath *and* dressed *and* disposed of four people on the telephone, all by seven-thirty——"

"Dinner was ordered for seven-thirty," Grayle interrupted.

Mrs. O'Rane puckered her lips mischievously and laid one finger on them to enjoin silence.

"Are you listening to my story?" she asked. "If you'd just be patient and not pretend you're working out the times for an infantry advance—" She turned to me with a quick smile. "How long would you say it took to get here from 'The Sanctuary,' Mr. Stornaway?"

"That depends how you go," I said. "It's no time in a taxi."

She clapped her hands in delight.

"That's what I always say! When anyone finds fault with Westminster or the Embankment—fancy finding fault with the Embankment! It's like being compromised with the Albert Memorial. But people do, you know; the Embankment, I mean; they say it's not healthy—well, when they find fault, I always say, 'Ah, but it's so central. You can jump into a taxi and get anywhere in no time!' Just what you said, Mr. Stornaway. Well, as dinner was at half-past seven and it took me *no* time to get here, there was no point in leaving the house before half-past seven, was there?"

Grayle was nodding at each new development in her rather diffuse story, but there were hard, unamiable lines

from nose to mouth, and I fancied that her smiles and tricks and absurdities were not amusing him. As she paused for want of breath, he took a step backward.

"Don't go away, when I'm talking to you!" she cried, catching him by the sleeve. "It's rude, to begin with,—and you know you're always sorry after you've been rude to me. Oh! the times you've had to call with a taxi full of flowers! I will say this for myself, I'm very forgiving—; and, in the second place, you're missing the *real* pathos of the story, what the Americans call the sob-stuff. I left home at seven-thirty, as I must have told you before, but you will keep interrupting; I walked to the Houses of Parliament—no taxi—; I persevered down Whitehall—no taxi; fainting with fatigue and weeping from sheer mortification, I dragged one foot after another—for the honour of England, you know—up the Haymarket—no taxi—; and, believe me or believe me not, *as—you—like,* I never saw a taxi till I got here. Then an angel-creature drove up and said, 'Taxi, miss?' and it was almost more than I could bear. I wanted to jump in and drive round and round the Park to shew people that there was just one taxi left in the world and that I'd got it. Nothing but the thought of this *wretched* play brought me here at all—the play and the cocktail; you must admit that, if anyone ever deserved a cocktail, it's me. And, if you say you haven't ordered me one or that they're bad for me, I shall go home."

She handed me her gloves and held out a bag to Grayle, as she began to take off her cloak.

"Now, is that the whole story?" he asked.

"That's a synopsis," she said. "I can elaborate it, of course. Some of the people I met on the way——"

"I think we can dispense with that. Dinner was ordered for seven-thirty, and the play begins at eight. I was starting out, as you came in, but I waited to hear if you had anything to say, any explanation to give. Stornaway has your ticket, and the table's that one in the first window. I may see you later."

Mrs. O'Rane looked at him for a moment without understanding; then her mouth opened slowly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

"Good-bye."

"Come back this *instant!*"

Grayle turned his back on us with a perfunctory bow and limped away.

"If you don't come back, I'll never speak to you again!" she cried.

Whether he heard her or not made no difference to his steady progress. As he reached the door, Mrs. O'Rane turned nonchalantly to me with a smile and a shrug. A moment later she glanced casually over her shoulder to see if he was coming back. A moment later still, with amazement in her eyes, she was hurrying after him into the street.

When George Oakleigh arrived with his cousin at a quarter past eight, he told me with some concern that he had forgotten to book a table. We were very comfortably accommodated, however, in the first window.

5

For three weeks I endured an unsought holiday in bed with influenza at the Hyde Park Hotel. In my absence everything seemed to have gone on very much as before, and, when I met O'Rane at the House on the eve of his return to Melton, he told me that he, too, had spent the recess in London with his wife and that Miss Merryon had been packed off to the sea for a change of air. Outwardly all relations were amicable, but Bertrand told me afterwards that Mrs. O'Rane consistently displayed the guarded civility of a wife who had discovered her husband's infidelity, but decides to stay with him rather than create a scandal.

"Are you going back to Melton, then?" I asked O'Rane.

"Yes. I haven't found anything else suitable so far. You see, I feel it must be war-work of some kind; and it

must be paid. I don't seem much nearer solvency than when I came back from France twelve months ago."

I had a vision of "The Sanctuary," as I had seen it at the O'Ranes' house-warming, crammed to overflowing with their friends and his chance acquaintances. I knew something of his prodigal generosity and of his wife's no less prodigal extravagance; and I could form no idea how they kept their heads above water. Bertrand, of course, contributed to the up-keep of the household; O'Rane had his salary as a Member and some trifle from Melton; his wife possessed a few hundreds of her own, eked out with chance gifts from admiring friends. Sir Adolphus Erskine, the great financier, would give her a set of furs or a pearl necklace, Lord Pennington would send her a case of champagne out of some unexpected discovery at an auction, but this hardly helped to appease the tradesmen.

"I don't know what you can expect," I said.

O'Rane frowned in perplexity.

"I made a lot of money and I saved a lot of money before the war," he said, "but I don't seem able to do it now. . . . When other people . . . I know it's impracticable to go out and give a loaf to *everyone* who's hungry, but it's frightfully hard to refuse when you do in fact meet them. I daresay it's mad, but George and everyone will tell you that I've always been tolerably mad, and I'm afraid I've got much madder since the war." He gave one of his whimsical, Puck-like laughs and then added soberly, "Poor Sonia!"

"I hope you're in a state of grace," I said. "You know, a madman can be very cruel."

He looked into my eyes, and I shivered; for, though I knew him to be sightless, he seemed to be looking into my soul.

"Sometimes I feel there's not room for compromise in this life," he said.

"You are—thirty? I'm afraid I'm a quarter of a century older, O'Rane."

"Thank God! there's room for inconsistency," he laughed.

I was at my office the following afternoon when George Oakleigh telephoned to say that his uncle wished to see me at once on a matter of urgency; could I make it convenient to come round immediately? I replied that it was exceedingly inconvenient, but that, if he could play truant from the Admiralty, I could absent myself equally well from my own department.

"Thank God you can come!" he exclaimed with disquieting fervour. "It's a bad business."

I arrived at "The Sanctuary" to find all silent and tense with expectant tragedy. Bertrand sprawled with slackened limbs on a long wicker chair, an untasted drink by his side and an unlighted cigar in his mouth. George was looking bleakly out of the window, with his right hand gripping his left wrist behind his back; the afternoon sun exposed every line and wrinkle of his face, and I found him ten years older, effortless and numbed.

"Tell me what's happened," I said, as I closed the door.

Bertrand looked at me for a moment, though I could see that his attention was wandering, and then turned to his nephew.

"You'd better go back to him," he suggested. "I don't think *we've* got anything more to say to each other."

The second closing of the door was followed by a long silence.

"Tell me what's happened, Bertrand," I repeated.

"Oh, nothing!" He gave a barking cough of mordant bitterness. "I *told* George it wasn't fair to drag you in, when you had in fact been spared it. David came back unexpectedly this afternoon to find his wife in Beresford's arms." He buried his face in tremulous hands. "My God! my God! They've not been married a year! And a blind man!"

When Bertrand is cynical, I find him tiresomely cynical; not content with condoning human depravity, he seems to

take personal credit to himself for it. When he is humanly moved, I find him unnerving.

"Tell me the whole story," I said, "before I try to comment on it."

"Comment on it?" Bertrand echoed and sat silent, staring at a picture on the opposite wall.

The story, when it came, was old and simple. The end of the holidays found the O'Ranes as undecided about the future as at the beginning; it had been easier, I presume, not to discuss it, and no word had passed until the evening before. Then O'Rane had announced his approaching return to Melton, and from that the game, encounter, what you will, had developed automatically. His wife begged him not to go, hinted that he had promised to stay in London and after the usual interchange was undecided whether she would keep him company. It depended . . . There followed the expected debate on Miss Merryon. O'Rane was taking her to Melton whether his wife came or not, as he needed the services of a typist; Mrs. O'Rane would not go, if "that woman" went, and, if O'Rane went with her alone, he knew the consequences. . . .

"Then I went to bed," said Bertrand, pressing his hands to his head. "I imagine they must have had an unprecedented row, and this morning O'Rane went off to Waterloo, leaving his wife like a spitting cat. I slunk out of the house as soon as possible; I didn't want the quarrel at second-hand. Sometime this afternoon O'Rane came back. When he got to Waterloo, he felt that he couldn't part from his wife for three months on such a note. He came back to make friends, to see if they couldn't arrive at some *modus vivendi*. . . . He felt his way round the library; it was deserted; felt his way round the hall and found her umbrella in the stand; went upstairs. Her door was locked, and he tapped on it, begging her to let him in. She shouted out that he wasn't to come in; and he stood there minute after minute, praying her to remember their love, to forgive him, to be reasonable, generous, to forget their wretched quarrel. Never a sound came from inside the

room. He had worked himself up until he was sweating with emotion. When he stopped, there was utter silence. Then he heard a cough. . . ."

Bertrand paused to sip the drink at his elbow. It was not Sonia's cough; it was the bursting cough of a man who had been trying in a long agony of suffocation to repress it. At the sound something primitive and overmastering took possession of O'Rane. He stepped back and flung himself against the door, but it was old, and the weight of his body only wrung a hollow groan from its solidity; within all was still silent. Again and again he charged the door with his shoulder until one panel split and broke in, and the lock creaked in outrage. Insensible to physical pain which was quickly maddening his brain, he took a last flying leap which wrenched handle and lock from the wood-work and sent him to measure his length on the floor.

The same uncanny silence greeted his entrance. He drew himself upright, rubbing his bruised shoulder, and embarked on what from Bertrand's account was truly the grimmest game of Blind Man's Buff. With the muscles of his back and arms braced to resist an attack, he advanced slowly with arms outstretched and body bent, like a foot-ball player waiting to collar his man. In the first half of the room his groping hands touched only the familiar tables and chairs, but with every yard forward he was uncovering a retreat for the adversary. Retracing his steps, he kicked the door closed, pushed a bed against it and advanced once more towards the window. In the unbroken silence he had to keep stopping suddenly for a half-heard sound of hurried breathing, but his own pulses were hammering so loudly that he could not trust his ears. Nearer and nearer to the window he crept, until an unnamed sense told him that he was within touch of a human body; as he paused, there was a shiver followed by a sharp intake of breath; someone's nerves were breaking under the ordeal. The waving arms swept forward and closed on a woman's shoulders.

"Sonia!" he panted and could say no more.

For a moment longer the silence continued; then from behind her came the foot-shuffle of the man whom she had been shielding. O'Rane's hands dropped, and he sprang beyond her, only to bark his knuckles on the wall, as his unseen quarry doubled and ran; there was an instant's vague chase, the sound of a lame man sparing his injured leg, the squeak of rolling castors, as the bed was dragged back from the door, a scratching for the handle that was no longer there and finally the echoing slam of the door itself. O'Rane sprawled once more on the floor, as his foot met a rucked billow of carpet; the hurried limp grew distant and faded; there followed the slam of a second door, and the house returned to its afternoon silence.

What either found to say to the other neither Bertrand nor I had any means of guessing.

"She's gone," he told me hollowly. "I saw her driving away, as I came back from the House—just before we sent for you. O'Rane was standing in the middle of the library like a—like a man in catalepsy. George came in a moment later, and we had the story as I've given it to you." He paused and breathed deeply. "I'm getting too old for this sort of thing, Stornaway; my—my brain strikes work at a time like this, you must tell me what we've got to do. There'll be murder, if he ever gets his hands on Beresford, and we've got to stop that. I'd murder the fellow myself, if I could, but we can't have David hanging for him. And we must do something for David."

With a quavering hand he picked up the tumbler from the table by his side and sipped its contents mechanically. His eyes were half-closed, and his mind at least was asleep with very exhaustion. My own worked feverishly with utter want of concentration. I told myself that I might have expected this after my surprise meeting in Beresford's flat, that it had been going on for Heaven knows how many weeks; then that none of this was to the point, that O'Rane was in a bath of liquid fire, that something must be done; lastly—yet my first thought and appreciation—that none of us knew what to do, that nothing could be done.

I have no idea how long I stood staring at Bertrand's shrunken face and closed eyes. Death had left his finger-prints on the big, self-indulgent face when the old man had his stroke at the beginning of the war. I remember wondering how many more rounds he would survive. . . . Yet he had lived fully, powerfully and pleasurably for more than his allotted span; young O'Rane was little more than thirty and he had already undergone what would have broken men of less heroic spirit.

Instinctively I moved towards the door, and at the slight sound Bertrand opened his eyes and asked what I was going to do.

"God knows!" I answered.

Instinctively I found myself walking down the stairs which Beresford and O'Rane had descended so precipitously an hour or two before. The same strained air of expectancy hung over the passages and hall, and, when I pushed aside the curtain and entered the library, George started like a surprised criminal. The room was in twilight, and it took my eyes several moments to grow accustomed to the change from the sunset glow upstairs. Then I caught sight of O'Rane sprawling on the sofa, motionless and silent; his hair was dishevelled, his clothes dusty on one side, and I could see white skin and a stain of blood through a rent in one trouser-knee.

"It's—Stornaway," George explained.

For a moment O'Rane seemed not to have heard; then he said:

"Thanks. Thanks to you both. Later on, perhaps. . . . Just now I'd rather——"

I exchanged glances with George, who shrugged his shoulders and rose silently to his feet. O'Rane collected himself and walked to the door, fortified by the routine of social convention, as though he were speeding a dinner-guest on his way. I passed by the flame-coloured curtain and turned the handle of the door, looking round to recapture the vision seen one night when O'Rane caught his wife to his heart, while I looked on and envied them

something that had never been granted to me. There was no response to my pull, but, at the rattle, O'Rane stepped forward with a muttered apology, pulling a cumbrous key from his pocket and feeling for the lock with the fingers of his other hand. George and I passed into the street, the door closed behind us, and I caught the sound of rusty wards turning in an unaccustomed lock. George put his arm through mine and asked if I was going back to the House.

"I shall dine at the Club," I said; and I wondered how either of us could speak so conventionally.

We walked the length of Millbank in silence.

"You'd have thought he had enough to put up with already, wouldn't you?" George asked dispassionately; then, with a tremor in his voice, "God in heaven! it's a smash-up for Raney! I didn't think she was capable of it, I've known her all her life, I'd have sworn she'd have pulled up in time. . . . Of course, she's always *had* to have people fluttering round her and paying her compliments, and I wasn't a bit surprised to find a boys' school of young Guardees hanging about the house the moment she'd moved into it. It was the same when she was engaged to Jim Loring—God knows, she knocked a big enough hole in his life, you'd have thought there'd be some reactive effect on her. . . . But, on my soul, because she'd been doing it so long, I thought she could be trusted. I thought she really loved Raney, I thought he was the only person who could manage her. . . . He *would* treat her like a man. 'No one's ever let up on me. Trust people, and they'll repay your trust. . . .' All that balderdash. . . . It's succeeded amazingly well with men, he can do what he likes with them. But women must be fundamentally different. . . . We're both bachelors, of course. . . . But I always feel there was a lot to be said for Petruchio. Raney loved her most kinds of ways, and she loved him on and off in some fashion for years; he really only *won* her, when he was frankly brutal to her—I had the story from both, so I know; she was caught in Austria, like you, and he

smuggled her back and shewed her pretty clearly who'd got the stronger personality; then she married him after he'd gone blind, when all our emotions were in tatters; and, having once married her, he seemed to think that mere love and trust were enough to keep her. I don't know; I've never had to live with a woman; I can't help feeling, though, that, just as he won her by main force, so he could only hope to keep her by main force. And he didn't even give her the 'mere love and trust' I've been talking about; he *trusted* her all right, but I think the kind of practical Christianity that he tried to set up was too much to ask of anyone—let alone a spoilt darling like Sonia. . . . He's always been so infernally uncompromising, it's his strength and his weakness; it's because he was uncompromising that he's kept alive and it's because he's been uncompromising with her that he's brought this on himself."

We had walked up Whitehall and were waiting for a gap in the traffic by the Admiralty Arch.

"But this is all ancient history, George," I reminded him. "What are we going to do?"

"To soften the blow? Nothing. We *can't* do anything. Sonia's cleared out, I suppose she' gone off to join Beresford. Well, Bertrand thinks Raney's equal to murder, but you can trust Beresford to keep out of the way. . . . I suppose there'll be a divorce. . . . I honestly don't know what to do about Raney. He's my oldest and dearest friend, but I don't know more than the surface of him. . . . God! If I had Sonia's throat in my two hands!" He broke off and pulled me roughly off the kerb, gripping my arm until we were half-way down Cockspur Street. "I've never been faced with this kind of thing, Stornaway. I suppose you must have been?"

"Nothing so bad as this," I was able to answer him.

We walked on into Pall Mall without speaking. Then George gripped my arm again.

"That poor devil alone in the dark with this—*this* to occupy his thoughts!"

I made no comment. I do not see what comment was possible.

"I feel so hopelessly at sea!" he exclaimed agitatedly. "Stornaway, you've had to pull people out of holes before; can *nothing* be done? Can't we get her to go back? Would he receive her back? Of course, we're all of us seeing red now, but somehow every hour that she spends with Beresford makes it harder to get her back; if we could use Raney's love for her——"

"D'you want her to go back?" I interrupted.

"God knows *what* I want!" he sighed.

We had reached the steps of the County Club, and I told George to come in and have some dinner with me. Both of us were already engaged in different parts of London, but we wanted to hold together.

"Come to Hale's," he said, shaking his head. "It's pretty well deserted since the war; everybody's fighting. I can't risk meeting a crowd of people I know and having to pretend nothing's up."

Leaving St. James' Square, we walked through King Street and entered the squat Regency house which had sheltered succeeding generations of London's exquisites for a hundred years. The coffee-room was deserted, and we had a choice of wine, food and service; but I have never eaten a gloomier meal. Every few minutes George would say, "Look here, you know, something's got to be done about this!" and I would reply, "Nothing *can* be done." Then we would attack a new course. Though we had chosen Hale's to be secure from interruption, I am not sure that we were not both a little relieved at the end of dinner when Vincent Grayle limped in with an evening paper under his arm and asked leave to join us for the short remainder of our meal. I can get on with him at a pinch; George cannot; but we shared a common need for diversion.

"I've just this moment got back from France," Grayle said to explain his late arrival. "I've been having a lively week at G.H.Q., watching the professional soldiers losing the war for us." He summoned a waiter and truculently or-

dered dinner. "Anything happening in London?" he asked.

"Nothing much," I told him. "What news from the Front?"

"Everybody's very cheery, getting ready for the big push. They all seem quite sure that they're going to break through this time, and there's an amount of ammunition and reserves that really does put you in good heart when you think how the men out there were starving in the first part of the war—thanks to the gang we had running things on this side. Whether we've got the generals is another question; if not, we must make a remarkably big clean sweep, politicians included."

He was evidently preparing one of his usual attacks, and, though I had welcomed the momentary diversion, neither George nor I wanted a political argument at such a time. With a trumped-up apology we went into the morning-room for coffee and liqueurs, leaving Grayle to his opinions and his evening paper.

"We don't seem to have thought out anything very helpful," sighed George, as he threw himself into a chair. "D'you think it's the least good going round to Beresford's place and forcing Sonia to go back?"

"Do you want her to go back, even if you can make her?" I asked once more. "She's been saying for weeks that she regarded her marriage as at an end; now she's proved it. Do you want to send her back on those terms? And does O'Rane want to have her back?"

George covered his face with his hands, shaking his head despairingly from side to side.

"I—don't—know," he groaned. "And this must have bowled poor old Raney over so much that I don't suppose *he* knows. Ordinarily—but it's absurd to use such a word. . . . I can only say this; he loved her so much, he loved her for so many years, he believed in her—or in some wonderful idealised conception of her by which he saw every kind of saintly quality where the rest of us only regarded her as a good-natured, but quite heartless, fascinating coquette—he thought of her and dreamed of her, she was so

much a part of his life, the big part, the only thing that mattered. . . ." He paused, out of breath. "You'd have said that it would have been like cutting off his arms and legs, if he'd lost her, if she'd died or married Jim Loring or the other fellow she was engaged to. . . . But I don't know now. When you've given all that love and trust, when you've idealised anyone, and the whole conception crumbles away . . . Stornaway, he's extraordinarily frank; I fancy I know more of him than most people. Well, I *do* know how he loved that strumpet; I don't know, I can't say whether he'd love her still or whether he'd just want to strangle her and then cut his own throat. . . . But I think it's worth trying. We can at least give him a chance, we can keep his hands off her——" He jumped up, leaving his coffee untasted. "I'm going to have a shot."

"Shall I come with you?" I asked.

He was already half-way to the door.

"I want everyone I can get!" he threw back over his shoulder.

We drove to Sloane Square, and in ten minutes' time I found myself once more mounting the stairs to Beresford's flat. The lower floors were silent and deserted, but, as we climbed higher, I heard voices and the tramp of heavy feet growing louder and more distinct with every yard that we covered. As we rounded the corner of the passage, I stopped with a sickening sense of foreboding, when I found my path blocked by a policeman. For a moment no one spoke, and I fancied that we were being scrutinised with disfavour, even with suspicion. George, however, was too much preoccupied to be daunted.

"Is Mr. Beresford at home, d'you know?" he asked. The constable shook his head. "D'you happen to know where he is? I have to see him on a matter of great urgency. If he's not in, I'll go in and wait till he comes back."

He made a step forward, but the man shewed no sign of yielding.

"Afraid I can't let you by, sir," he said. "No one's allowed in."

I was assailed by a dreadful certainty that we had arrived too late.

"Why not?" I demanded, but my voice quavered too much to be effective.

"Mr. Beresford's been arrested."

"But, in God's name, what for?"

"That's none of my business," was the answer.

George was diving significantly into his trouser-pocket, but I felt that what lay before me was too serious for trifling with half-crowns. I handed the man my card and repeated my request.

"It's not mere curiosity," I said. "If you don't tell me, there are others who will; but I want to save time."

I always have the letters "M.P." printed on my cards to impress government departments, for throughout the public service there is an inherited dread that a question may be asked in the House; the hierarchy from top to bottom makes it the first business of life to avoid such publicity. This instinct of self-preservation, deeply-rooted as a horse's fear of a snake in the grass, led the constable to inform me promptly that Beresford had been arrested for issuing seditious literature; his flat was at the moment being searched.

My own sigh of relief was drowned by a deeper sigh from George.

"When did this take place?" he asked.

"To-day, sir. I can't tell you the time; I've only just come on duty."

"Was there anyone there besides Mr. Beresford? Is there anyone there now?"

"The inspector, sir; and two men."

George thanked him and led me by the arm to the head of the stairs.

"Thank God!" he whispered. "You—you thought so, too; I could see it in your face. Oh, Christ, if they were going to arrest the fellow, why couldn't they have done it sooner? *I* don't know what to do now. At least—I must go back to 'The Sanctuary' and see what's happened there." He dragged me down stairs and into our taxi at a pace which

more than once threatened to break both our necks. "Where the devil can *she* have gone to, Stornaway? She'd naturally come here. But, when they arrested him . . ."

The shrouded lamp over "The Sanctuary" door was unlighted when we arrived; the door was locked against us, and, though I now remembered hearing the key turn when O'Rane shewed us out, the cherished little piece of his beloved childish symbolism was grown painfully familiar.

"Come round to the other door," said George, and we were admitted and ushered into Bertrand's room. "Any news?" he enquired gently.

Someone had drawn the blinds, someone had brought in a tray of food; otherwise the room was unchanged in aspect, and Bertrand seemed not to have moved since I left him stretched in the long wicker chair three hours earlier.

"News?" he repeated, opening his eyes and blinking at us. "David's gone back to Melton. Ah! this is a bad business! Give me a hand up, George; I'm tired. I sometimes think I've lived too long."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DOOR CLOSED

"Proprium humani ingenii est, odisse quem laeseris."
TACITUS: *Agricola C. 42.*

I

As I write, the war has been in progress for two and a half years, and it is beyond the wit of man to foretell how much longer it will continue, though there is the annual feeling that peace will come before the autumn. In August we shall reach the end of the three years which Lord Kitchener had in mind when he began his preparations, but I for one look forward to the summer of 1917 with greater apprehension than ever I felt a year ago. During 1916 I was the unconscious psychological victim of men like Grayle who were so convinced of our predestined failure under the existing régime that they went some way towards convincing me. In June the field of war was extended by the Bulgarian inroads into Greece, and, though we talked still of the "Russian steam-roller," it was not until July that the Austrian counter-drive in Russia and Italy was checked. The New Army, which had been so grandly raised, went into action at the Somme and covered itself with immortal renown; we did not quickly see how much had been spent and how little achieved—"Six hundred thousand casualties and an unbroken German front," as Grayle declared to me in the Smoking-Room at the House one night.

Grayle's political sense was good in that from the breakdown of the Somme offensive he saw that the days of the Government were numbered. Ministers never recovered the prestige which they had lost in the Irish rising. The dis-

astrous expedition to the Dardanelles was being discussed so widely and bitterly that an enquiry had to be instituted; so with the no less disastrous expedition to Mesopotamia; and, as more men were frittered away in Salonica, we began to wonder whether we should not have to hold a third enquiry, indeed an enquiry into every subsidiary enterprise which every amateur strategist in the Cabinet undertook in any theatre of war.

There were many who began at this time to swell Grayle's clamour for a change,—a series of changes, indeed, simultaneously in the Ministry which was weak enough to embark on this succession of costly failures and in the soldiers who failed to achieve success with such conditions of men, material and ammunition as the Germans had never equalled in the days when the balance tipped highest in their favour. I had, myself, always simulated rather a superior aloofness, for I felt that, as the war was a bigger and longer enterprise than my fellows would admit, so we must be prepared for greater failures in coping with it. Yet I can see now that I began to listen less impatiently to the critics. The War Office at this time was in the charge of a distinguished soldier who had had the vision and courage to prophesy a long war and whose personality and reputation were of inestimable value in creating the armies which came to bear his name. Largely on newspaper prompting, the Government had made Lord Kitchener Secretary of State for War, and the country as a whole was reassured by the presence of an expert military brain in the deplorably civilian councils of the cabinet. There was a simple-minded faith, which expressed itself in Maurice Maitland's phrase, "Leave it to K."; a volume of work which no single man could accomplish was thereupon trustingly concentrated in the hands of one who loved to hold as many strings as possible. Stagnation in the War Office gave way to chaos, until one function after another—recruiting, equipment and munitions—were withdrawn from his grasp and confided to others. Later the Staff control was separated from the political control, and Lord Kitchener gave no orders that were not coun-

tersigned by his Chief of Staff; later still an effort was made in the cabinet to deprive him of an office which he had ceased usefully to fill. He was sent to inspect the Eastern theatre of war; he was sent also to Russia. . . .

I am unlikely to forget a day when I was lunching with Bertrand at the Eclectic Club. Maitland sat down with a blank face and said, "I've got some bad news for you men. K's been drowned. He was going out to Russia, and his ship—the 'Hampshire'—was sunk by a mine or torpedo—they don't know which, and the North Sea must be full of loose mines after this Jutland action. The sea was so rough that the escort had to turn back almost at once. . . ." Some time passed before we could discuss Maitland's news, for Lord Kitchener had been so imposing an idol, so aloof and mysterious—until you met him at close quarters, as I had done a few days before, when a deputation of us waited on him and sought enlightenment on subjects which we could not discuss openly in the House—so well-established and unshakable; we never expected him to die in the middle of the war, certainly we never dreamed of a death so fortuitous, unnecessary, so much the freak of Providence.

"Yet I'm not sure it's not the best thing for his reputation," Maitland said. *"Felix opportunitate mortis,* you know. There's a whole crop of failures to explain, and his prestige must have suffered. Don't you sometimes feel that we want a clean sweep, Stornaway? . . . I'm a soldier myself, but it was a great mistake, whatever people may think, putting a soldier at the War Office. . . ."

The news was being cried in the streets, as I went back to my department; half-way through the afternoon a messenger came into my room to say that all blinds in all government offices were to be drawn; that night, Yolande told me, was the worst she had known since the tidings reached her nearly two years before that her brother had been killed in the retreat from Mons. Wave after wave of men poured from the leave-trains and surged into her canteen, demanding confirmation of this story which was being whispered at the coast. And, when she told them or pointed to the of-

ficial report, they still would not believe it. He was the man under whom they had enlisted. . . .

Yet, when a civilian was once more at the head of the War Office, I believe that a new embarrassment was substituted for the old. As the Somme campaign had failed to achieve a decision, men like Grayle openly resumed the criticism which they had suspended for a few months and demanded the removal of the responsible Commander in Chief and the Chief of the General Staff. Thereupon two schools arose in the Press, the House and, I believe, the Cabinet; the civilian backers of Sir William Robertson and Sir Douglas Haig pitted themselves against their civilian detractors; individual commanders were surrounded by social cliques and supported by individual Ministers and papers. I was told by Grayle and by the section of the press influenced by him that we wanted a reconstruction of the Ministry and of the Higher Command; I was told by the Press Combine that Sir Douglas Haig was the one general of outstanding genius whom the war had brought to the surface.

Between the two I confess that I lost my temper. Even with South Africa and the Antwerp expedition to his credit, Grayle was no more fit to appoint or depose a Chief of Staff than I was to cast a play or select a *prima donna*. But I found it difficult to say who was better placed than either of us. Grayle certainly was a pragmatist.

"Results! results!" he would declaim at me. "I want the contract put out to tender. Can you or can you not break the line? What men and guns do you want? Here they are; you may have three months, and, if you fail, no dignified home commands, but the completest breaking a man's ever had. That's the way Napoleon would have done it; that's the way the Germans would do it."

Grayle was very active in the summer of 1916. I could see him drawing together and co-ordinating the scattered groups of disaffected critics, and my mind went back to George Oakleigh's account of the "Stunt Artists." There was the Liberal Ginger Group, the Conservative Ginger Group, the Mesopotamia Group, the Dardanelles Group, all

firing occasional volleys into the arms and legs of the Ministry, none daring to fire at the head or heart. The apparently strongest man in the House at this time was Sir Edward Carson. Not content with criticism, he could force the Government to bring in a bill, modify a bill or drop a bill. Glad indeed would Grayle have been to consolidate opposition under such leadership, but at this season unity was regarded as the first requisite; no one was yet prepared to split the Government or the country into rival factions.

If not active, I was at least very assiduous in my attendance during those summer months. I was assiduous, too, at my office and in my department. The last act of the O'Rane tragedy at which George and I had assisted hit me as hard as the death of a very dear friend. I had thought that I had outgrown other people's troubles; I found that I was younger than I thought. When I met Bertrand or George, I shunned discussion of the subject; when I went to Melton, I will say frankly that I avoided a meeting with O'Rane. During May I fancy that the others joined me in my conspiracy of silence, and we were aided by events. I read one day that a certain Peter Beresford, described as an author, had been prosecuted for issuing a pamphlet entitled "Lettres de Cachet," which was calculated to undermine the loyalty, discipline, and moral of the army; the pamphlet was confiscated, and its author sentenced to a term of three months' imprisonment. Whether he repeated his hunger-strike or not, I had no means of knowing, as he passed out of my life on his arrest and only re-entered it many weeks later.

Mrs. O'Rane had disappeared as completely and far more mysteriously. In the early months of the year, quite apart from deliberate meetings at her house or Grayle's or Lady Maitland's, I had caught sight of her at least once a week lunching or dining in a restaurant or chattering to one or other of her many admirers at a play. After the catastrophe, though I probably dined and lunched in as many of her favourite restaurants as before, I never met her. There was a vague assumption that she was in the country. One night,

as I was smoking a cigarette in the *entr'acte* at some theatre, Gerald Deganway came up, screwed his eye-glass in place, squeaked a welcome and asked whether I had seen Sonia lately. I told him that I had not. He rather understood that she was staying with her people at Crowley Court. . . . After consultation with O'Rane, George transferred himself to Westminster to look after his uncle and to keep the household in commission. I believe that he forwarded letters to Melton and I have an idea that there was a second vague assumption that she was with her husband at the school. The ties and relationships in social life were so much disorganised by the war that no one was ever surprised by an unexpected meeting or a failure to meet; everyone was too much occupied with his own business to care.

I had convincing evidence of this one day when I received a call from Lady Dainton. She wished to equip Crowley Court as a hospital for shell-shock cases—anyone could deal with ordinary wounds and operations; there was no adequate scheme for treating these nervous derangements, and she felt that her house was unusually well adapted for the purpose. After we had thrashed out her proposal, I undertook to recommend my Emergency Fund Committee to make a grant. There our business ended, and, as I walked with her to the door, she looked at her watch.

"It's no good," I remember her saying. "I hoped to leave time for a call on Sonia, but I shall only miss my train, if I try. It's really dreadful how driven we all are. I never have a moment for anything, don't you know? This is the first time I've been in London for months, I've seen nothing of Sonia for I don't know how long—Ah, surely, that taxi's disengaged? I mustn't miss it. This petrol shortage is really the last straw. As if we hadn't enough discomfort before, don't you know?"

I returned to my desk with a pusillanimous sense of relief. The Daintons, then, neither knew nor suspected what had become of their daughter. The secret was in the keeping of the O'Ranes, the two Oakleighs, Beresford and myself. Somehow the disaster seemed hardly so complete while

there was no public scandal, and neither the Oakleighs nor I were likely to add that last touch. For the others I could not speak; Mrs. O'Rane or Beresford or both might welcome a petition for divorce; no one knew what was passing in O'Rane's mind.

Before term was a month old, George went to Melton on a roving commission.

"I would as soon spend a week-end with a well-bred block of ice," he confided to me on his return. "He was courteous, hospitable—nothing too much trouble to make me comfortable. We talked by the hour of fellows who'd been at school with us, things we'd done—you know, endless ridiculous anecdotes of how somebody's leg had been pulled, how we'd got into some appalling row together. As a rule I find school 'shop' rather fun, but Raney might have been reciting the kings of England with their dates. He was utterly lifeless and mechanical; never a smile. . . . When we went into Common Room for dinner, he played up and was a different man; *they* chaffed *him,* and *he* chaffed *them,* and we dug out more school 'shop,' and he threw himself into it heart and soul. It was the same on Sunday, when a pack of his boys came and talked to him after evening chapel; he didn't let *them* see there was anything up. It had been the same when the enigmatic Miss Merryon came in the morning; the usual smile. . . . Of course, he never came within a thousand miles of mentioning it. . . . When I left on Monday, I told him that I wanted to invite myself again before the end of the term, and then we did get to grips a bit. He shook hands and said, 'Look here, old man, it spoils your week-end and—I don't want to be ungracious—it doesn't do me any good. I've got to go through this alone.' "

From George's sigh I felt that in this he was at one with O'Rane.

But, if not more than six people knew what had happened, there were many who would be more curious to find out than Lady Dainton had shewn herself to be. It was easy enough for Bertrand or George or one of the servants

to say that Mrs. O'Rane was away from London and then to hang up the receiver of the telephone, but it was a different matter as the weeks went by and as the more pertinacious enquirers called in person. I could sympathise with George. The only person likely to interrogate me was Grayle, and from the fact that he never mentioned Mrs. O'Rane's name I judged that they had quarrelled finally and finally parted on the night when I was privileged to meet them at the Berkeley. I had enough psychological curiosity to wonder what had happened when she hurried out into Piccadilly after him. Grayle had assuredly scored a game when he asserted himself and made her run after him; but the game had been won when he was too tired to be desirous of winning it.

My first tidings came to me at the end of May from my niece. She and her husband were dining with me one night at my hotel, and she asked me whether I had been at "The Sanctuary" lately.

"I've been very busy," I told her. "And I believe Mrs. O'Rane's away."

"She's not away," Yolande answered: "I saw her at Harrods' yesterday. That's what made me think of it."

Yolande, then, knew nothing of what had happened.

"I wonder when she got back," I said as unconcernedly as I could. "Did she tell you?"

"We didn't speak." Yolande's expression became hostile. "I suppose I dislike her every bit as much as she dislikes me, but so far we've kept up appearances. I bowed to her yesterday, and she couldn't help seeing me, but for some reason best known to herself she thought fit to cut me."

"She couldn't have seen you," I said.

"She couldn't *help* seeing me," Yolande repeated.

2

Three days later I myself met Mrs. O'Rane in Hyde Park. Remembering Yolande's experience, I determined that she should not cut me and, as we had no opportunity

of pretending not to have seen each other, I blocked her path, bowed and held out my hand to her.

"I've not seen you for weeks," she said with a composed smile. "You've not been to America again, have you?"

"I've been kept very busy at the House and in my department," I answered. "Have you been away?"

"For week-ends and things." She glanced collectedly round to assure herself that she was not being overheard. "Why did you button-hole me like this, Mr. Stornaway?"

I suppose my real reason was that, if there had to be any cutting, it should not be by her; and I had not made up my mind how to act when we found ourselves suddenly confronting each other at the park gate.

"When a man meets a woman he knows——" I began.

Mrs. O'Rane laughed with soft, repellent scorn.

"As if you didn't know everything."

"That is, I believe, an attribute of the Almighty," I replied.

For a few moments she was absorbed in the task of digging with the end of her parasol round the edge of a prominent black pebble. As the dry earth crumbled, the pebble worked loose, and she was free to hit it away and look up at me again.

"You know enough."

"For what?" I asked.

She sighed and waved her hand across the dusty, unshaded walk.

"For passing by on the other side."

"Habit is sometimes very strong," I said.

We stood looking at one another reflectively for a few minutes, each perhaps wondering why the other did not make an excuse to break away. I found her so self-possessed that it was difficult to believe what I knew to be the truth. I have met unfaithful wives before, I have seen men and women living in many kinds of social outlawry, but with none of them did it seem to make so little difference as with Mrs. O'Rane. She was not defiant, she was hardly even callous; and her manner was so natural that

I felt the last six months might well have been blotted out of her life. Once she lowered her eyes to look at the little platinum watch; then raised them again with a friendly smile. She was dressed with unostentatious distinction in a blue coat and skirt, with a high collar to the coat and a tight-fitting amber-coloured waistcoat with round, page-boy's buttons; there was a high-crowned hat to match the coat, white gloves, grey stockings and black shoes with a pearl-coloured border. Though her eyes were tired and her cheeks a little pale, she looked wonderfully young and carefree.

"You thought I wouldn't do it," she said at length, more to convict me of bad judgement, I think, than to defend her own conduct. "Men are so curious. . . . You all had the clearest warning, only you wouldn't take it. You wouldn't see that it was the only thing left for me to do."

"And you are still of that mind? You feel it was the right thing?"

"It depends what you mean by right," she answered slowly. "Most people would say it was wrong, but then most people are fools. And none of them could possibly know what I had to go through," she added through her teeth.

"They'll never know that," I said, "because you'll never be able to tell them. As long as you're happy——"

"I'm very happy," she interrupted.

"And you think you'll continue to be?"

"No one can answer that. . . . I'm happier than I was. You, of course, think that I've behaved criminally. I only feel that we made a mistake. I thought David loved me, and he—didn't. I believe *he* thought he loved me. . . . I made every possible allowance for him, I did everything a woman could do to make a success of our life, but you must have seen enough to know that he never gave our marriage a chance. I was ready to put up with everything until he humiliated me in my own house. Then it was time to admit we'd made a mistake and to get out of it as soon as possible." Her parasol was again at work on the hard-baked gravel. "If he'd hated me, if he'd enjoyed hurting me, he couldn't

have done better. I never knew what men were capable of before."

In my turn I looked at my watch and held out my hand.

"I have not criticised you, Mrs. O'Rane," I said, "so I prefer not to assist in any criticism of your husband."

Her lips curled into a sneer.

"You haven't criticised me in *words*," she qualified.

"I am trying to suspend judgement till I know the facts. You will admit that it requires *prima facie* justification when a young wife leaves a husband who worships her—I will cut out the offending phrase, if you like—leaves her *blind* husband——"

I have only once seen Mrs. O'Rane's beauty of face wholly desert her. At the word "blind" her cheeks flushed, her eyes grew hot and the line of her mouth became broken and unsightly. Months before, Bertrand had told me that her husband's blindness was the one thing restraining her, and, though she had lashed herself into disregarding it, she evidently could not forget it. I could see that a passionate retort was maturing, but she pressed it back and took my hand.

"Good-bye," she said. "Remember, I didn't ask you to speak to me. This is a matter between David and myself. You needn't think it was an easy thing to do, but I faced it, I've gone through the worst——"

"Not more than six people in the world know that you're not living with your husband," I put in.

She hesitated, and I could see her lips compressing.

"I'm ready for that, too," she assured me, valiantly enough.

"Where *are* you living?" I asked.

"You must excuse me if I don't answer that. Good-bye."

As I walked on towards my office I wondered what use I ought to make of my chance meeting. Yet how would O'Rane or George be benefited by knowing that she was living—was *probably* living in London? And this was all that I could tell them save that, however great her provoca-

tion, however unheeding the passion which had possessed her and allowed her to receive a lover in her husband's house to punish her husband, she was not yet insensible to every twinge of conscience: I had succeeded in once flicking her on the raw.

Then I blamed myself for wasted opportunities; if I had been less conventionally suave, less afraid of a noisy scene, I might have put many more questions even if I received as few answers. Her life with O'Rane was over, but what was she going to put in its place? He could divorce her, of course, and she could marry Beresford—when he came out of prison. I never felt, however, in the days before the catastrophe that she loved Beresford;—to be adored and admired by him was one thing, but I never regarded him as more than a diversion, when no one else was by to flatter her. Even had the passion been there, I could not imagine her marrying such a man. The blue coat and skirt, the high-crowned hat and patent-leather shoes did not accord with a rusty sombrero, Harris tweeds and a loose, orange-coloured tie; I recalled the bizarre, bachelor rooms of Sloane Square and, in exaggerated contrast, Mrs. O'Rane's ermine coat, as I had seen it when I surprised them there. In any day I dare swear that she could not tell whether she had spent five pounds or five hundred; but, if she did not know how much she squandered in a year, at least she could be sure that it was far more than she would ever get from Beresford. And, if she did not propose to marry him, where and how would she live? Would she try to drag out a few more months or years as his mistress with the four or five hundred pounds a year which her father allowed her? Where and how was she living now?

To a long list of idle questions I added one more and asked myself how I was to behave, if I met her again. It was not easy to avoid her at the second encounter when I had forced myself upon her at the first; it was certainly no easier to continue as O'Rane's friend and to meet his wife as though nothing had happened.

An unsolved problem spoils my temper, and I was with

difficulty even civil when a messenger came into my room to say that Lady Maitland wished to see me. She was shewn in and proceded straight to the point. Was it true that under this ridiculous Military Service Act all men under forty were to be dragooned into the army? I must remember how kind I had been in finding a position for her son in my office. Well, he had come home the previous evening and told her of a report that *all* young men were going to be taken. It made no difference that he had only been allowed to attest on condition that he could not be called up without leave of his chief. That was all a *scrap of paper,* apparently. Every case had to be submitted to the War Office, every man given a certificate of exemption or packed off with the roughest clerks and factory hands into the ranks. What was she to do? It was intolerable.

It argues, if not self-control, at least great gratitude for past hospitality that I did not remind Lady Maitland of the first dinner I ate on English soil after my release from Austria, when she deafened me with her denunciations of the young shirkers who stayed at home and allowed others to die for them. I was finding no fault with her boy, who might be all that she said; I had seen him twice and pushed him hastily into a fool-proof room where he read the "Times" and acted as précis-writer for one of my colleagues; if he were unfit for the army, there was a chance that he might be rejected, though embittering experience taught me that it was only a chance. If he were passed as fit, the first girl in the street could take his place after a day's instruction, and the office would be rid of a young man who was doing no good to himself or anyone else with the number of whiskies and soda which he found time to consume on his way to the office or with the cigarettes which he smoked all day when he had made his reluctant way thither.

"Has he been medically examined?" I asked Lady Maitland.

"It would be a waste of time," she answered. "I tell you, that boy is a mass of nerves."

"Well, send him him before a medical board with a letter from your own doctor," I suggested.

To judge from her expression, my proposal was unexpected and inadequate.

"Isn't the best thing for you to send a letter to the War Office?" she asked. "Bertie tells me that his work is very technical."

I was grown tired of that word through many a "conscription scare" and I resented its presence on the lips of Lady Maitland, who had been too free with her taunts ten months before, too disparaging of the volunteer army and too easily insistent on the conscription from which she was now trying to extricate her boy.

"*He* had to learn it," I reminded her. "And, if he died to-morrow, somebody'd have to learn it in his place. If you want to move the War Office, surely your husband's the man to do it."

"I don't like to bother him," she answered.

As she walked to the door, I felt that I had lost a friend. It says much for her magnanimity that I was invited to the house within a week to be told that the War Office—without encouragement from Sir Maurice—had behaved most sensibly, reviewing the junior members of my department *en bloc* and granting them all certificates of exemption on the grounds of indispensability.

"We seem drifting back to the old life very much," said George, pensively watching the bubbles break on the champagne, when I told him, with some distaste, of my interview. "Here we are eating and drinking as usual, I'm always being invited to dances. . . . We're getting *used* to this infernal war, you know, Stornaway, and we shall lose it, if we can't put up as relatively good a show as the fellows who are being killed. I suppose we're too far away from the front even with an occasional air-raid to remind us."

"I was glancing through my diary the other night," I told him. "There's hardly a reference to the war. The political situation, my own work——"

He laughed a little sadly.

"If I kept a diary, I'm afraid I should find a good deal of it devoted to Raney and his wife."

"I did," I told him.

He looked up quickly and then lowered his head until his chin rested on his fists.

"God! that has been a tragedy!" he groaned. "It's the biggest tragedy of my life, bigger than when Jim Loring was knocked out. Presumably it was all over with him in a few minutes *or* hours *or* days at most. . . . But that poor devil Raney—he's some years younger than I am."

"What is he doing?"

"He gives no hint. It's about as much as he can stand—the agony of it—without trying to analyse it or think what he's going to do next. Did I tell you I went down there again? Well, I did—in spite of what he said. I've a convenient young cousin whose people are over in Ireland—Violet's brother, you met her at dinner with me at the Berkeley—and I can always legitimately go and see him. It was rather less of a success than my last visit. The first person I ran into was Lady Dainton, who asked me to shew her the way to Raney's quarters. She couldn't make it out, she said, that she'd written to Sonia about a concert at the hospital, written twice and had had no reply. Obviously she was away from home, but apparently it was nobody's business to forward letters." George smiled ruefully. "It was a hit for me, though she didn't know it. I send all letters to Raney, and Sonia's go in a special envelope marked 'For filing only'; it was a formula he and I agreed on, so that Miss Merryon could just chuck them into a box unopened. . . . I don't believe even *she* suspects, though it's bound to come out. . . . And she's in love with him, and *that's* supposed to sharpen a woman's intuition. . . . Well, I've no doubt Lady Dainton's letters were in the box with the rest, but that didn't bring her much nearer getting them answered. I felt I must really leave Raney to deal with her, so I said I'd promised to call on the Head and would come back later. . . . By the way, Burgess sees there's something up; he'd see there was something up if you built a

brick-wall round it. When I went into his study, he looked at me for about five minutes, stroking his beard between his thumb and first finger. 'He is thine own familiar friend, whom thou lovest,' he began without any beating about the bush. 'I know the whole story, sir,' I said. 'If I thought for a week, I couldn't think of anything worse. If I may make a suggestion, sir, the kindest thing you can do is not to notice anything.' Burgess stroked his beard a bit more; then he said—'The adder is not more deaf.' But I'm prepared to bet he's made a very shrewd guess."

"Did you gather how O'Rane disposed of Lady Dainton?" I asked.

George shrugged his shoulders.

"He had to say that Sonia wasn't at 'The Sanctuary' and he had to admit that he didn't know her address at the moment. Fortunately, Lady Dainton is so ready to think ill of him and so very unready to think ill of her darling daughter that she never dreamed or suspected what had happened. I don't know whether she went further than thinking that Sonia was staying with friends and that Raney wasn't sufficiently interested in her to discover her whereabouts; perhaps she did, for she took the opportunity of saying that it was monstrous for him to desert his wife like this for three months at a time, but that, on her honour, he didn't deserve to have a wife, if she was to be condemned to the life he had led at Melton or in London. Raney was smiling to himself and saying nothing, when I came in, so she turned her batteries on to me. As a rule she frightens me into agreeing with anything she says, but this time I did pluck up courage to tell her that, in my opinion, when two people married, they must be left to work out their own salvation. There's a certain irony there, Stornaway,—I was conscious of it at the time—when you think of the way you and Bertrand and I laboured to keep their boat from capsizing. She didn't appreciate the irony, though; she only thought I was being rather rude. That didn't matter so long as I got rid of her."

He pushed away his plate, sighed and rose from the table.

"Did you have any talk with O'Rane?" I asked, as we went upstairs together.

"That depends on your definition of talk," he answered with a joyless smile. "We emitted words at each other. It—I don't mind telling you, Stornaway,—it hurt like sin to find that I couldn't get near him. I suppose it was a compliment to our friendship that he didn't try to cut jokes as he did when I dined with him in Common Room the last time, but it was an unfilling sort of compliment. . . . No, to offer him any kind of sympathy would have been to get myself pitched out of the room. I felt that. He was in a suit of mail. . . . I should have thought—but then I've not been through it and, please God! I never shall. It did hurt, though, because there hasn't been much that we've kept from each other all these years."

He laughed a little at his own sensibility. I thought for a moment and then told him of my meeting that day in Hyde Park. From behind their rimless glasses, his eyes were fixed unwaveringly on mine, and at the end he made no comment.

"What line do you propose to take if *you* meet her?" I asked.

His brows set in a forbidding frown, and, when he spoke, it was between closed teeth, and his voice trembled.

"I think I told you, my *instinct* is to get her neck between my two hands and shake her as a terrier shakes a rat. I suppose that would be out of place in the more public parts of London, so I shall walk quietly past her. What induced you, knowing all you did——"

"I have no idea why I did it," I said, quite humbly.

"Are you going to do it again?"

"My dear George, once more, I have no idea. I'm like O'Rane in that I haven't been in the mood to analyse or make decisions. I've shirked them. I've deliberately tried to keep my mind occupied with other things so that I *shouldn't* have to think about this miserable business. Most of us are doing that, I fancy."

He was silent for many moments, and I fancied that he

was visualising my meeting in the light of an early summer morning in Hyde Park with Sonia O'Rane, brown-eyed, red-lipped, redolent—to the senses—of purity and young freshness.

"As long as that swine's under lock and key," he said at length, "she can't make a move. And, when he's out, they're bound to hold their hand till they see what Raney's going to do, whether he's going to face a divorce—when I say 'face,' it's on her account, of course. He'd stand anything for himself, but I don't know that he'd let any damned two-and-one junior put questions to Sonia—I don't know, and he doesn't know. . . ." He covered his face with his hands. "God in Heaven! Stornaway! I remember when I was the oldest fourth-year man and he was a freshman and she was nothing at all—a lovely little slip of a girl who'd been sent up for Commem. in place of a woman who'd failed us. Raney'd loved her ever since he'd first set those god-sent eyes of his on her, and they solemnly got engaged that night—when he was nineteen and she a baby three years younger. . . ." The rising voice which was beginning to make our neighbours turn curiously round stopped of a sudden. "Sorry! I'm apt to break out every time I think of that boy coming back from the front . . . and not letting it make *that* much difference to him . . . and starting again at the bottom for God-knows-the-how-manyth-time—and then—*this*. . . . Well, Raney's not in a state to say whether he'll divorce her or not, what he will do, what he wants to do. You're quite right, we're none of us in a position to analyse. By the way, what do you propose to do, if you run into Beresford?"

"I don't see myself engaging him in conversation," I said.

3

As a false merit seems still to attach to frankness, let me record that, when I met Beresford some three weeks later, I bowed to him and subsequently went up and exchanged a few words. This meeting also took place in Hyde Park,

I was again making a slight *détour* for the sake of seeing the flowers and once more I turned in at Albert Gate and was nodding before I saw who had nodded to me. When I recognised Beresford, there was a moment's impulse to stalk away, but I am glad to say that I did not yield to it.

He was sitting in a bath-chair, out of the wind and in the sun, alternately dozing and waking with a start to look at the flowers and then close his eyes again. I have seen sick men in various parts of the world, but I doubt if I ever saw one who was still alive and yet looked nearer death. All flesh had disappeared from his face, until the bones of jaw, temple and nose threatened to cut through the waxen skin; his eye-lids were more vermilion than pink, with a permanent dusty-grey shadow darkening the hollow sockets. One hand lay exposed outside the rug, so thin that it seemed as if the bones must grate together; the other pressed painfully to his side whenever he began to cough.

"Why, how do you do?" he exclaimed in a weak whisper, bowing a second time, as his eye-lids flickered open and he found me watching him.

"You look remarkably ill," was all I could say.

"I'm better than I have been. It was really rather a close shave this time. They evidently felt it was a point of honour not to be beaten again and they kept me there just twenty-four hours longer than I could conveniently stand. I wasn't conscious of anything,—I hadn't been for some while before and I wasn't to be for some time after—but they had a bad scare. After doing their best to kill me for five days, they spent five weeks trying to keep me alive—so like war and peace, you know; wasteful, irrational and utterly, utterly purposeless. In a few weeks' time I shall be where I was when last we met; the Government will have kept me quiet for perhaps two months and will have expended a portion of a magistrate's time, ditto ditto prosecuting counsel, and six weeks' bed, board, share of prison staff and really first-rate medical attention. No one could have been better treated when once they were afraid they'd killed me."

He tried to laugh, but only succeeded in making himself

cough. As he shook and rocked, growing momentarily pink and then reverting to a deathlier white, as I watched that bag of tuberculous bones being held together by a nervous refusal to die, I shared the sense of waste which O'Rane had once expressed to me. An impulse came to me, and I acted on it before I could give myself time to be cautious and niggardly.

"If I can get you out to South Africa, will you go?" I asked him.

He tried to speak before he had finished coughing, and the attack redoubled in violence.

"That would be playing their game *rather* too much," he said with a skeleton's grin.

"You're playing their game as quickly and more permanently by staying here."

"You mean I'm going to die? Now, there you're wrong. Of course, I shall die *some* time like everyone else, but I'm actually getting better now. If you'd seen me a month ago——!" He looked round at the flowers with eyes that burned feverishly. "I've got so much to do, there's so much to live for! Don't you feel you *can't* die, you *won't* die, when you see all the new leaves with that shade of green which seems only to last for a day before it becomes dark, dull, mature, dirty. . . . And the first flowers—before we've had time to be sated with them. This is June, summer. . . . And long before that, the little pink, sticky buds bursting everywhere. . . . And those curious fluffy things which you find on some shrubs and which seem to serve no purpose in nature. . . . I shall die in the autumn, when I *do* die; I couldn't in the spring, when the whole world's renewing itself and there's so much to do. God! there *is* so much to do!"

He smiled to himself, and his eyes suddenly closed. It was more than time for me to be on my way, but the scrape of my heel on the gravel roused him, and he held out his hand.

"It was kind of you—about South Africa, I mean,—but I can't get away—for reasons which I needn't discuss. And in

any event it isn't necessary; I'm going to get well without that."

I shook hands and turned my steps eastwards. There are few things more painful than the dying consumptive's belief that he will recover. Beresford called me back with a cry that brought on another fit of coughing.

"I'm in my old quarters," he said. "You were rather—disgruntled by your last visit, I remember, but, if you've got over the shock and can ever spare a moment to call——"

This time I shook my head without hesitation or compassion. I do not remember ever being more affronted. A chance encounter in the street might be excused me; one may be pardoned for not upbraiding one's worst enemy when he is as near his death-bed as Beresford was; but it was another thing altogether to condone the past and acquiesce in the present. It was also what Mrs. O'Rane had virtually challenged me to do, when she lost her temper in Beresford's flat and asked whether I should continue to know her when she had come to live with him.

"I shall not call," I said. "Good-bye."

Thereafter I denied myself the walk from Albert Gate to Hyde Park Corner and went to my office through Belgrave Square and the Green Park.

I kept my own counsel about our meeting and went on with my own work, trying not to think of the O'Rane tragedy until it was brought to my notice by a chance encounter with O'Rane himself. I was deliberately not seeking his company, but I was pleased when he joined me in the Smoking Room at the House.

"*Your* voice at least is quite unmistakable," he said with his old smile. "So is Grayle's. The people who beat me are most of the Irish and a sprinkling of the Labour men—fellows who don't open their mouths from one end of the session to the other. And I'm here so little that it's slow work learning. Still, I'll back myself to be right ninety-five times out of a hundred, if I've heard a voice more than once. Do you know whether old Oakleigh is about?"

"I saw him here before dinner," I said.

"I promised to walk home with him. Why don't you come along, too? There's nothing of any interest on, and you can smoke in greater comfort at my place. Let's see if we can hunt him out."

Bertrand had sat down late, and we found him finishing his coffee in an almost deserted dining-room. It was still light, however, when we got outside, and we strolled at an easy pace along Millbank to "The Sanctuary." I had not been there since the night nearly three months before when O'Rane's life was broken in two. As we walked, I thought of the other night when Grayle and I met him for the first time, when, too, he had carried Beresford on his own back into the now empty house. He could not but be thinking of it himself, and I hardly knew whether to pity or admire him the more for his unembarrassed way of admitting us to his secret without suffering us to allude to it.

Unlocking the door, he went ahead to turn on the lights, came back to relieve us of our coats and bade us help ourselves from the side-board, while he opened a box of cigars. Perhaps from nervousness he talked rather more than usual and shewed himself unnecessarily solicitous for our comfort; otherwise we might have been sitting, as we occasionally sat ten months before, waiting for Mrs. O'Rane to come back from the theatre. . . . I confess that I started—I believe we all started—when we heard a taxi draw nearer and nearer, turn out of Millbank and stop at the door. Bertrand and I were facing the room, and we both of us gave a quick glance over our shoulders. O'Rane continued talking unconcernedly, only stopping when the curtain was pushed aside and George came in.

"It's a great thing to have a place where you can be sure of a drink after licensed hours," he remarked contentedly. "I've had no dinner and not much lunch; and I've left the Admiralty this moment. This war's got beyond the joke some people still think it. Don't mind me, Raney, I'm going to fend for myself and eat solidly for the next half-hour. What's the question before the House?"

He seated himself on the arm of my chair with a hunk

of bread and cheese in one hand and a tumbler of whiskey and soda in the other. We were talking of the way in which our original intervention on behalf of Belgian neutrality had been overlaid by the nationalist ambitions of Italy in south Austria, France in Alsace-Lorraine, and by the frankly imperialist trend of Russia towards Constantinople and of ourselves towards Mesopotamia and in Africa and the Pacific.

"It may have been wise, it may be necessary," said O'Rane dubiously. "Perhaps you couldn't bring Italy in without promising Trieste and the Trentino, perhaps you couldn't keep Russia in without promising Constantinople."

Bertrand sighed and then yawned.

"I wonder if we've not bitten off more than we can chew," he growled. "*I* went through the phase of 'crushing Prussian militarism,' cutting up the map of Europe with a pair of scissors. . . . I hope nobody will put me up against a wall and shoot me, if I now doubt the possibility. I don't believe we *can* crush Prussian militarism."

"We—*can't.*"

The words, spoken in a familiar, sneering drawl, came from behind me. Bertrand and I swung round in our chairs to face the door; George leapt to his feet, letting fall his bread and cheese and discharging a torrent of whiskey and soda into my lap. If the ghost of Peter Beresford had walked in to reinforce Bertrand at the point where their doctrines most nearly touched, he could not have dumbfounded us more. But it was not Beresford's ghost. The July night was descending so slowly that we were content with a single lamp in the middle of the room. In the gathering dusk by the door, standing out against the orange glow of the door-curtain, I saw Beresford himself, leaning with one hand on a stick and grasping a shapeless soft hat with the other. He was as waxen of complexion and almost as cadaverous as when we met in the Park three weeks before, but he had made a spasmodic effort to seem collected on entering, and the sneer in his voice was reproduced by a suggestion of swaggering contempt in his attitude.

I wondered helplessly and almost without anger why he had inflicted this outrage upon us. Trembling and speechless, Bertrand propelled himself slowly to his feet; speechless and breathing quickly, George took two steps forward. We were all too much preoccupied to look behind and see what O'Rane was doing until I heard what I can only describe as a rattle in the throat; Beresford's eyes opened wider, and he took a half-step back; I turned my head in time to see O'Rane spring like an animal on its prey, both arms outstretched and both feet off the ground. There was a thud, as the two fell together, a gasp from Beresford, the noise of boots scuffling on polished boards and then a silence only modified by laboured breathing.

George was the first to move.

"He'll kill him!" he called back to us. "Help me separate them!"

As quickly as an old and a middle-aged man could move, Bertrand and I hurried to his assistance. O'Rane was straddling Beresford's body, pinning both arms to the floor with his knees and gripping his throat with both hands until the eyes glared in the early stages of asphyxiation and the mouth fell open, gobbling hideously. The face was swollen and mulberry-coloured by the time that we could see it, and the first feeble resistance had given place to the dreadful placidity of physical exhaustion.

"You fool, you're murdering him!" George roared, slipping both hands inside O'Rane's collar and putting forth a reserve of strength which lifted assailant and assailed bodily from the ground. "Pull his hands away, you men!"

I caught O'Rane's left wrist in both hands, but the polished floor gave no purchase to my feet, and I might as well have tried to pluck a propeller from its shaft. His arms were like flexible, warm steel. When I planted my foot against his shoulder, it was like resting it on masonry that quivered slipperily, but never yielded.

"Fingers, man, fingers!" George shouted again. "Pull 'em apart, twist 'em, *hurt* him!"

I take no pride in having followed his advice save in so

far as it saved the boy from the scaffold. Bertrand and I, each with our two hands, gripped O'Rane's third and fourth fingers, tugged and twisted until a stifled cry of pain broke from his lips. George was shaking him like a rat, and at last the grip relaxed and Beresford's head fell with a second thud on the floor.

"Don't let go!" cried George. "Now, Raney, will you swear on your honour not to touch him again?"

There was a sullen, long silence varied by the rip of rending clothes and the clatter of feet, as O'Rane made three unsuccessful plunges forward.

"You're—hurting my—hand!" he panted at length with the whimper of a little child.

George shook his head at me passionately.

"Will you swear on your honour, Raney?"

"Let me—*get* at him!" O'Rane sobbed.

"We'll break your fingers off at the knuckles if you don't swear!" George returned through clenched teeth.

There was a second silence, a last plunge.

"I won't touch him," sighed O'Rane.

We stepped back, panting and mopping our foreheads; then Bertrand walked to the nearest chair and subsided into it; I leaned against a sofa; George stood for a moment, rocking from his late exertion, then pressed one hand to his heart and hurried into the street, covering his mouth with a handkerchief. O'Rane stood where we had relaxed our hold on him, bending and unbending his tortured fingers; Beresford lay motionless and silent.

George's re-appearance with a request for brandy galvanised us all, but chiefly O'Rane, who walked up to him with out-thrust lips and cried:

"You can clear out of this, George Oakleigh, and I don't advise you to come back here."

"Don't be a fool, Raney," George answered wearily.

"If *you* hadn't put them up to it——"

"That's precisely why I did it. It was the only way of stopping you. Don't think I enjoyed it, old man." He caught O'Rane's right hand between his own two and patted

it, as if he were caressing a woman. I learned afterwards that in addition to losing his sight O'Rane had been wounded in both hands. "Go and get some brandy—or wait, I'll get the brandy, while you lift Beresford on to a sofa. I've pulled my heart out of place."

Between us we made a rough bed and tried to bring the unconscious man round. His heart was fluttering like a captive bird, and for longer than I cared to count there was no other sign of life. At last the eyes opened for a moment, and I saw George relax his labours and lead O'Rane to one side.

"You'd better go to bed, old man," he said. "I'll report progress later, and we'll get him away as soon as we can. You'll only make things worse, if you're here when he comes round."

To my surprise, O'Rane allowed himself to be led away, and George returned to share our vigil. A second and third time the eyes opened; twice Beresford tried to raise himself and once his lips moved in soundless speech.

"Don't try to talk," I said, as I gave him some water to drink.

He closed his eyes, and a quarter of an hour passed before they opened again.

"W—w—why——?" he stammered suddenly.

"Don't—try—to—talk," I said again.

"But *w—why* did he do that?" Beresford persisted with slow obstinacy. "Is he m—m—mad?"

George, Bertrand and I stared at him and then at one another.

"Don't try to talk yet," was all that I could find to say.

4

Bertrand allowed himself to be sent to bed at midnight, but George and I took it in turns to watch by Beresford's side. We had a doctor in, but the danger was past before he arrived, and his only orders were that we must report any change. Until dawn we tried sleeping for an hour and

watching for an hour, but, as an opal light came to warm the rafters on the west side of the room, George sacrificed his turn to sleep and joined me on the sofa.

We looked at each other for some moments without speaking, both equally tired, dishevelled, unshaven and perplexed.

"Well?" I said at length.

"Well?" he echoed. "By the way, I promised to report progress to Raney; and I never did. I don't see what we can say at present. We've got to clear this up before he comes down."

"What do you *think?*" I asked.

George hesitated.

"The fact of the fellow's coming here at all——" he began slowly.

I nodded.

"We must wait till we can question him direct," he went on evasively.

"But, *if* we're right, he mustn't know," I put in.

"Till everyone knows," sighed George.

Beresford stirred restlessly, and the sound of a moan silenced us.

"If—" George began again in a whisper. I nodded. "God above! if we hadn't managed to pull him off in time!"

I put my finger to my lips, as Beresford stirred again.

"He's waking."

We were sitting in a line with his head and outside his field of vision, unless he raised himself on his elbow, which at present he was incapable of doing. We saw his eyes open and close again, open and close again, the opening each time growing brisker than the faint closing, until he was strong enough to stare about him and take in two-thirds of the room. I saw wonder dawning in his face as he found himself unexpectedly in familiar surroundings; he carried his hand to his head in the effort to remember how he had got there; then his fingers mechanically slid down to his throat, and I watched him gingerly exploring certain purple marks. Abruptly his eyes closed for another long quiescence, but he

was gaining strength and at the next opening he dragged himself unsteadily to a sitting posture, clapped both hands to his temples and slowly turned his head until he had brought the whole room under observation.

"Where's Sonia?" he demanded abruptly, looking at me with flickering eyelids.

"She's not here at the moment," I answered.

He stared uncomprehendingly until a pain at the bruised back of his head made him wince and despatch one hand to assess the danger.

"How long——" He winced again. "How long have I been here?"

"Since last night," I told him. "You had a fall."

He continued to stare at me without comprehension and then grew suddenly indignant.

"Had a fall?" he repeated. "I *didn't* have a fall. What d'you mean? It's all coming back to me now. I was dining—I don't know where I was dining, but afterwards I thought I'd come round and see Sonia. . . . Why did O'Rane attack me like that? Was he mad?"

George's foot pressed lightly against mine.

"What do you mean—'attack' you?" he asked with fine simulation of surprise.

"He attacked me," Beresford persisted doggedly. "He knocked me down." His eyes closed once more. "Where's Sonia?" he asked again.

"She's staying with friends," George answered. "I say, I shouldn't talk too much, if I were you. You're looking rather cheap, and I hear you've been pretty bad."

For the first time Beresford was able to twist his features into a malevolent grin.

"I'm putting on weight again now," he boasted. "You'd look cheap, if you'd gone through what I have."

"How long were you in prison?" I asked.

Beresford sighed and shook his head.

"I don't know. I was unconscious for some days at the end. They arrested me on the third, the trial was on—I

forget. . . ." He lowered himself till he was lying full length on the sofa.

"They arrested you on the fourth, you say," I began with a glance at George.

"The third. My birthday," he corrected me, caressing his bruised throat with one hand. "There was a ring at the bell, and I got out of bed and went to the door, expecting to find the postman. Instead of that, there was an inspector with a warrant. He asked whether I was Mr. Peter Beresford, read me the warrant. He wouldn't let me shave, I remember; I suppose he was afraid I might cut my throat; and I was only allowed to have a bath on condition that he was in the room. I don't know which was the more embarrassed. . . ."

He paused to laugh feebly, and I withdrew to the window and checked his date by my engagement book. George raised his eyebrows to me and at my nod tiptoed to the door and made his way to O'Rane's room.

"What *happened* last night?" Beresford demanded, covering his eyes with the hand that had been feeling his throat and rubbing his bruised head with the other. "Was everyone drunk?"

"I can't quite explain now," I said.

Whether O'Rane had been to bed or not, he was washed and shaved, dressed and booted, when George went into his room at five o'clock. Beresford was reported out of danger, and after some hesitation George asked again to be given the fullest account of O'Rane's unexpected return two months before.

"I'll tell you my reason now," he said, as O'Rane's expression hardened. "I want to make certain—I'm *advocatus diaboli,*—I want your evidence that it was Beresford at all."

"Evidence? I *heard* him, she admitted it! Who else could it be? And he comes back here——"

"Steady on, Raney, this is no way to conduct a trial. I'm going to get Stornaway up here, if I can, and we're going into this very thoroughly."

Beresford was sleeping so tranquilly that I left him without compunction. Upstairs the court of enquiry had been joined by Bertrand in pyjamas, dressing-gown, and slippers; George was sitting on the bed with a blotter and writing-pad on his knee, O'Rane walked to and fro with the noiseless tread of a cat. We were all grey-faced and haggard in the diamond, five-o'clock-in-the-morning light. I found myself a chair, and the proceedings opened with a repetition of the story which Bertrand had given me as second-hand. It was more temperate and less dramatic, as O'Rane told it two months after the events; it was slightly fuller, but in no respect did it vary substantially from the earlier account.

"I'm not a lawyer," George said at the end, looking up from his notes, "whether you'd get a divorce on that, assuming you wanted one . . ." he added quickly, as O'Rane's eyes narrowed. "We haven't finished yet, though. You say Sonia admitted it?"

O'Rane nodded and then seemed to repent his nod.

"She didn't *deny* it," he said to correct himself. "I say, you fellows don't want me to go into this part of it, do you? It's not very pleasant for me. I'll just tell you that I *assumed* it was Beresford——"

"Why did you assume it?" I interrupted.

"She was very intimate with him. She used to talk—I thought it was in joke, of course, a silly joke that I didn't like—she used to talk about going off and living with him, if we ever had a disagreement about anything. Besides, I'd heard him hopping out of here and down the stairs on one leg. I naturally assumed. . . . And she accepted it. I—I *can't* tell you what we said to each other, but it was never in doubt, it never *has* been in doubt till this moment."

George pursed up his mouth and shook his head reflectively.

"This is only telling us what the sergeant said," he observed. "However, let's get every shred of evidence before we let Beresford open."

He looked enquiringly at his uncle, who shrugged his shoulders a little impatiently.

"It's not *evidence*," Bertrand began. "I'm old-fashioned, I daresay I attach too much importance to trifles; I can only give you what I've seen and heard."

It was indeed not direct evidence, it was not even circumstantial evidence. Mrs. O'Rane had been very intimate with Beresford; when he was lying ill at "The Sanctuary," she would sit stroking his hand; they sometimes remained together until a very late hour, and she thought nothing of kissing him good-night. On his side Beresford made no secret of his infatuation.

"Neither made any secret of anything!" growled Bertrand, thumping his fist on his knee. . . . "I suppose it's the modern method. . . . I don't understand it. That's why I say my evidence is no use. If you get up and tell them they've no business to be kissing, they'll retort that it was all open and above-board, that I was present as often as not. . . . And it's true. I used to come in late from the House, I used to come in at all hours when I was on Special Constable duty; there they were, billing and cooing and not in the least embarrassed by me. You'd have said they rather liked an audience."

The unhappy O'Rane was wincing at every sneer or word of disapproval. Two months before he would have turned it off with a laugh, as everyone else did, and protested that it was Sonia's way and that we did not know Sonia. . . . But, if he could have been induced to speak frankly, he would probably have agreed with me that some of his wife's friends and a good deal of his wife's behaviour were meretricious.

"I'd better add my testimony, while we're about it," I said. The boy winced again, and I could see him bracing himself.

I told him how at his request I had called on Beresford to warn him against running his head any further into the trap which was being laid for him. I described his obvious anxiety to get rid of me, the embarrassment of our meeting, when Mrs. O'Rane came in, her light-hearted assurance that I should be *really* shocked, or something of the kind, if I

knew how often she had visited her patient at such an hour. It was not pleasant work, but I spared O'Rane nothing that my memory retained.

At the end George crumpled his notes into a ball and rose from the bed with a yawn of mental and physical exhaustion.

"As I said, I'm not a lawyer," he observed. "If Raney were bringing a petition, there's a hundred-to-one chance in favour of his getting a decree; I suppose there's a six-to-four chance on circumstantial evidence that you could bring the charge of misconduct home to Beresford." He paused to frown in perplexity, unconscious that the word "misconduct" had cut O'Rane like a lash across the face. "If it weren't for last night," he muttered. "It's—almost incomprehensible. Unless he came to make a clean breast of it, to tell Raney to divorce her and be damned. . . ."

O'Rane stopped short in his cat-like prowl and faced us.

"The only thing is to see Beresford," he said. "You'd better come with me. I can tell something from his voice, but of course I can't see him. Watch his mouth, don't look at his eyes; it's the mouth that gives a man away, when he's lying."

The library was stale with cigar-smoke after our long vigil. Beresford was asleep, but the noise of our feet roused him, and he sat up blinking at O'Rane, who was a pace before the rest of us.

"Why did you attack me last night?" he demanded the moment that we were in sight.

O'Rane came to a standstill with his hands in his pockets, swaying slightly from heel to toe.

"We'll go into that in a moment, if you don't mind," was the answer. "What was your motive in coming here?"

I had Beresford under vigilant scrutiny, and his surprise was real or uncommonly well assumed.

"To see Sonia, of course," he replied. "I didn't know you were at home. Do you usually try to *murder* people who come to see her?" he demanded with weak truculence.

"I know, of course, that you neglect her and ill-treat her yourself."

O'Rane rocked contemplatively to and fro, nodding thoughtfully to himself.

"When did you last see my wife?" he asked suddenly.

"I can't tell you."

"You've got to tell me, Beresford."

"I'm afraid I can't. I spent six weeks in prison and I've had another fortnight getting convalescent. It was some time before that."

"You have got to tell me the day, the hour and the place."

Beresford lay back with his mouth obstinately shut.

"Come along!" O'Rane cried.

"I can't and I won't. It was some time shortly before I was arrested. If you want to find out any more, you can ask her."

I refreshed my memory with a glance at my pocket-book.

"You were arrested on the third of May, you told me," I said. "Going back three weeks, I can definitely trace one occasion on which you met Mrs. O'Rane——"

Beresford's pale face suddenly flushed.

"If you're going to drag in your foul-minded suspicions about that," he cried, "have the decency to wait till Sonia's here."

"I told you that Mrs. O'Rane was away," I reminded him. Then I took O'Rane by the arm. "I want to have a word with you."

I was too tired to labour upstairs again, and we could be by ourselves outside. There was a haze over the river, rising almost before my eyes, as the sun climbed higher. A succession of young factory girls hurried along the Embankment on their way to work; one or two early carts rumbled over the cobble-stones in the neighbouring streets, and a chain of three black barges glided noiselessly towards Westminster Bridge. All else was still. I caught sight of my dusty boots, the cigar-ash on my waistcoat and a pair of

grimy hands,—the whole desecrating the clean clarity of the summer morning.

"Well?" said O'Rane.

I put my arm through his and walked towards the river.

"I'm prepared to bet that the last time Beresford saw your wife was when I spoiled their *tête-à-tête* in his rooms," I said. "He doesn't know I've told you already and he's in dread that I'm going to. Didn't you feel that? And it's not that he's afraid of you—I don't think he's physically afraid of anyone;—he doesn't want you to know that she was foolish enough to come to his rooms at such an hour."

O'Rane disengaged his arm and rested his elbows on the parapet and his chin on his hands.

"This was three weeks—before?" he asked.

"I don't believe he's met her since. I don't believe it *was* him."

He shook his head slowly.

"I couldn't see him, of course; I've told you I didn't get near enough to touch him, but I heard him going across the room and down the stairs on one leg. You aren't in a mood then to weigh your suspicions very judicially. . . . I taxed Sonia with it. My God! I can't go through it again, we were both of us out of our minds, I don't know what we said! But I assumed it was Beresford—I remember I kept on using his name. She never denied it. If it wasn't Beresford . . . ?"

"Let's first of all establish whether it was Beresford," I suggested.

He hesitated a moment longer and then pulled himself abruptly erect, took my arm and walked quickly back to the house. Bertrand and George, a pair of strangely disreputable figures, were dozing in arm-chairs; Beresford had his eyes open and fixed on us the moment we were inside the room.

"You wanted to know a few minutes ago why I attacked you," began O'Rane. "I'm going to tell you, but I should like to ask one question first. Are you aware that my wife is no longer here?"

"So Stornaway told me—twice," Beresford answered wearily.

"Do you know she's—left me?"

"I'm not surprised. I'm only surprised she ever came back. I don't know why she ever married you."

O'Rane paused to steady himself.

"I believed until recently that she had left me for you," he went on. "Now you can understand, perhaps, why I behaved as I did last night. I can't offer any apology worth having."

As he stopped speaking, he held out his hand almost timidly. Beresford stared at it contemptuously for a moment; then his cheeks flushed, and he took it.

"You can imagine I don't want this to go any further," said O'Rane in a matter-of-fact voice.

Beresford pulled him close to the couch.

"I—I don't think I'm there yet," he whispered. "Say it all over again, will you? Sonia's left you? She used to say she was going to, but that was only to tease you."

O'Rane's lips were quivering, and his voice trembled.

"I'm afraid it's all grim earnest," he said.

"She's left you? O'Rane, she couldn't! She loved you so much! I—I often thought you didn't treat her properly, you were frightfully unsympathetic sometimes, but there was nothing you could do to force her to this!"

Bertrand roused himself to control the excitement of Beresford's voice, which was beginning to react on O'Rane.

"Deal with realities, young man," he grunted. "The facts are as stated."

Beresford disregarded him and turned to O'Rane.

"But where is she?"

"We don't know."

"You don't know who she's with?" His face became suddenly more hopeful. "You've no *proof* that she's with anyone? She went away once before, remember."

A smothered sigh broke from O'Rane.

"I think I may say positively that she's with someone.

She's not merely staying with friends. I'm afraid I thought it was you and I must beg you to forgive me."

He tried to smile and again held out his hand.

"You needn't have thought it was me, O'Rane," said Beresford quietly.

"No. But I only heard a lame man hopping away on one leg. And I was seeing red."

"But you could both of you trust me! If there'd been a moment's danger, I'd never have seen Sonia again. I'm not the only lame man in London. You might have picked on Grayle before me, if she hadn't hated him so much."

O'Rane covered his eyes with his hand.

"I though of you both," he said. "When I heard the man going short on one leg, I felt certain that it must be one of you. . . . It's extraordinary how quickly you think at a time like that. I remember wondering whether I should be equal to tackling Grayle, if it were him. . . . Then I knew it couldn't be, because he'd insulted Sonia in some restaurant, and they'd had a row. Besides, he was in France at the time. And so I decided that it must be you. I'm sorry. You couldn't expect me to behave quite —dispassionately, could you? I'm only glad it has been cleared up. I'm afraid you'll have to stay with me again till we've patched up last night's damage. You can understand that for Sonia's sake this mustn't be talked about. When people want to know where she is, I—I usually say she's staying away and I—don't—quite know—when she's coming back . . ."

5

At the end of August I contrived a holiday for myself on the north coast of Cornwall, where Lady Pentyre had been good enough to offer me a house. Yolande and her husband accompanied me, and on a passing impulse I pressed O'Rane to join us. We could have given him society and some kind of mental distraction, but the House was still sitting, when I left London, and he made this an excuse for declining. In his place George came for a week,

to be followed by several of Yolande's colleagues and friends, whom she invited—I am fairly sure—less for themselves than for the chance of giving an inexpensive holiday to some exceedingly tired women.

It was a fortnight of pure enchantment. We rose at eight and walked over hot, spongy turf to the precipitous cliff-path which led us to our favourite bathing-place in our chosen bay. We bobbed and basked in a sea of liquid sapphire under a blazing sun and only left the water when hunger drove us home. Through long, happy mornings all four of us scrambled like children over the rocks, in and out of unexpected pools, slipping on treacherous bunches of sea-weed and cutting our feet on the cones of a mollusc's shell. We were always so wet and unpresentable by luncheon-time that there was nothing for it but to bathe again and put on dry clothes, which made us late and ravenous, so that we gorged ourselves on dishes which were becoming unprocurable in London and then lay sleeping repletely or glancing at the papers until it was time for another walk among the gorse and heather, a last descent to the foreshore where the Atlantic lay drowsy under the setting sun, creaming and lapping the black and dun rocks.

The papers, when we mustered energy to read them, brought us better news each day. Pressing north and west, the Italian and Russian armies were taking their revenge for the damaging thrust which each had lately sustained, and Austria-Hungary, squeezed simultaneously on two sides, had to adopt the unwelcome and desperate expedient of handing over the eastern troops to German command. The precarious hold on Salonica was strengthened by the safe landing of reinforcements, and, before we left in September, Roumania had thrown in her lot with the Allies.

Even in London, where for two years the soldiers on leave from any front had found individual self-depression and national self-depreciation flourishing most luxuriantly, became infected with brief optimism. In September a report from General Headquarters announced that an in-

fantry advance had been assisted by a mysterious new mechanism that rolled its uncouth way imperviously through the rain of bullets and shrapnel which poured on to its armoured sides, some land battleship which dropped unconcernedly into craters and climbed as unconcernedly over fortifications and chance *débris* of houses, an invention—the first of British initiative in the war—that bestrode enemy trenches and spattered a hail of death on either hand, a good-humoured steel giant that convulsed the troops until they held their sides and forgot to advance, a something, in fine, that the English soldier with his genius for happy and meaningless nicknames decided to call a "tank."

Old Bertrand, who had a pretentious theory to explain each new set of facts, enunciated a new art of war with the text "Machines *versus* Men;" the rifle-man to the savage with a spear in his hand was as the machine-gun to the rifle-man—or the tank to the machine-gun. War had been revolutionised, and our old calculations of effectives and losses must go by the board.

The mood of optimism passed as quickly as it had come. Hardly had we finished triumphing over German machine-guns with our tanks, overcoming the Zeppelin menace with our anti-aircraft guns—there was smart sport in October, amounting almost to a battue,—when the autumn campaign ended and we settled down to count the cost and prepare for a third winter. The figures of our losses made the Somme a Pyrrhic victory, and there was troubled wonder where the new drafts were to be found. Ireland, which had been left in suspect and timid neglect—like a dog which has snapped once and may snap again, but is quiet for the moment—became once more a public interest as a candidate for conscription. And ships were mysteriously scarce. And food prices were exorbitant. And the Government was tired, lethargic, void of initiative. . . .

"Thank God! my duty as a citizen is done when I've paid my taxes!" Bertrand Oakleigh exclaimed one night at the House. "I'm glad I'm not a farmer, I'm glad I'm not mixed up with industry. I should be unpatriotic if I didn't

double my output of foodstuffs and unpatriotic if I kept one potential piece of cannon-fodder to grow 'em; I'm a pro-German if I manufacture for export to keep up the foreign exchanges—Victory *versus* Trade!—and Lord knows what I am if I don't cheerfully pay taxes on a business I've had to close down. If I lose money, nobody sympathises; if I make any, I'm called a profiteer, and someone takes it away from me. . . . Curious how a phrase or an abusive nickname dispenses the people of this country from using such wits as a niggardly Providence has given them! You've only to whisper something about a 'hidden hand,' and a crowded meeting of City men will sit and hypnotise themselves into thinking that there's an active service of secret agents—with poor Haldane as Director General—quietly penetrating our social life and paralysing our efforts in the war. Hidden hand! Pacifist—they can't even throw their absurdities into decent English! Profiteer! We're so astonishingly petty as a nation! I wonder if the same thing's being reproduced in all other countries—the old *'Nous sommes trahis'* nonsense. . . . They're all governments of old men, too,—and they're tired—and no one outside knows what they've had to go through—and everybody's nerves are snapping. I'm sometimes surprised that these fellows have lasted so long, but I think their days are numbered. If you throw your mind back, you'll remember a phase when Asquith's worst political enemies said he was indispensable, the only Prime Minister, the one man who could hold the Government and the country together. You don't hear that now; we've outgrown that phase. Now people are openly saying that he's not master in his own house, that we shall never win the war so long as he's in the saddle, that they'll turn him out the moment they can find someone to put in his place. . . . Lloyd-George would be in power to-day, if his friends in Fleet Street could be sure that he wouldn't hanky-panky with the Army. . . . To read the papers, you'd think it was the cumulative effect of reverses like Gallipoli and Mesopotamia, the shortage of food, and the fact that we've done nothing to increase

our home production, and our failure to grapple with submarines. It's deeper and blinder than that. . . . It's because the Government *hasn't won the war* that it will fail; and any new Prime Minister will fall in exactly the same way, unless he can win it. Results! results! That mountebank Grayle is quite right; he represents average, unthinking, third-rate, violent opinion, and that opinion's becoming articulate. As I've told you before, I don't think a change will do any good, because we set ourselves too big a task, we started on too high a moral plane. I suppose I should be called a *'pacifist'* if I suggested that that phase was over and that we'd better moderate our tone before we're compelled to."

The particular non-party War Committee headed by Grayle was waking to activity after its suspended animation during the summer campaign. In his paper, in conversation at the Club and still more in the Smoking Room of the House he was calling for more vigour in administration. . . . The House of Commons position was curious, he informed me; if he could be sure of a certain number of votes—he would not trouble me with the figures,—we could have a ministry after our own heart. There followed an interval of perhaps five minutes, in which I allowed him to do all the talking. The Unionist members of the Coalition were sick and tired of this eternal "Wait and See;" there would be a secession the moment that a better alternative government had been sketched out; you had only to call a Unionist party meeting and put it to 'em straight. But you didn't want to take an unnecessary toss, you couldn't afford to supply powder and shot to rags like the "Daily News," which were always talking about an intrigue and saying that no government could exist with the Germans in front and back-stabbers behind. . . .

"Nothing's settled yet," he told me after considering academically the offices for which we were both fitted. "But you know the constitutional theory; you're not justified in upsetting a government unless you're prepared to go to Buckingham Palace and take on the job of forming

a new administration. Excuse me! I want to have a word with Oakleigh."

The following day I asked Bertrand under what guise the devil had appeared to him, but he had evidently been less patient.

"Grayle went away with a flea in his ear," he grunted. "He's been worrying me so long that I had to stop it once and for all. God knows, I don't care about this ministry; I shouldn't have much faith in any ministry formed out of the present House—the best talent's already on the Treasury Bench—and I don't believe in bringing in your superman from outside—the House of Commons can't be learned in a night, and even a government department needs study. What I object to in Grayle is his picking on *me* as one of his fifty or sixty new allies; you can picture him buzzing round with his fellow-conspirators—'Shall we try Oakleigh and Stornaway? They're solid, moderate, old members—highly respected. They don't add anything to the common stock, of course, but they carry more weight than the men who are always talking and playing an active part. We might try them, their names would look well on the prospectus—inspire confidence, you know.'" He chuckled maliciously. "I suppose I'm getting very old, but I can't stand young men's conceit in the way I once did. Grayle's like a boy just down from Oxford, doing everything for the first time and imagining that no one's ever done it before. Does he *really* think this is the first political intrigue in history? I recommended him a course of Disraeli's novels—to improve his technique. Good God! I was playing this game of detaching wobblers and handing out offices that were not in my gift and mobilising the solid, moderate, highly respected old members under *Gladstone!* I toiled and schemed to keep the Liberal Party out of Rosebery's hands; I was making new parties and pigeon-holing possible cabinets all through the Morley-Harcourt days, I was intriguing to keep C.-B. in command when the Liberal Leaguers intrigued to kick him into the

Lords. I've been through it all; and be hanged if I didn't do it better than Grayle!"

Perhaps my manner was too sympathetic. Certainly I was not to escape so easily as Bertrand had done, for Grayle met me leaving the House and offered to drop me on his way home. I accepted because I was nominally amicable with him, because I did not want a wet walk to my hotel and because I could not decently refuse. He talked persuasively the whole way home and was obviously chagrined when I did not invite him into my rooms. He rang me up at breakfast next day and tried to secure my presence at luncheon; once at my office in St. James' Street, once in my department, and once again, when I was tranquilly dining with the Maitlands, I was called to the telephone with an apologetic but urgent request that I would arrange a time when Grayle could have five minutes' conversation with me.

My position was simple and clear. I would be neither bribed nor bullied into any kind of office, I would give no blank cheque for the future to Grayle or anyone else, but I should no doubt be found voting with him against the Government—or with the Government against him—as I had done in the past, judging every division on its merits. A note on my dressing-table informed me that Colonel Grayle had telephoned from the House at eleven. . . . I picked up my hat, buttoned my coat again and turned my steps towards Milford Square; a far more patient man might be excused for thinking that Grayle was making a nuisance of himself.

The servant who opened the door informed me that Colonel Grayle was out.

"I'll wait," I said. "I've got to see him."

"But he's out of town, sir. He didn't say where he was going or when he'd be back. He very often goes away like that."

The man was sleek of appearance and glib of speech, well-experienced, I thought, in shutting the door to people whom his master did not wish to see. But I did not fall

within that category, and Grayle had plagued me sufficiently to justify reprisals.

"When did he go away?" I asked.

"Before dinner, sir."

"Ah, then he must have changed his plans," I said. "He telephoned to me from the House half an hour ago; he's been trying to get hold of me all day, but this is the first opportunity I've had. Is Mr. Bannerman in? If so, I'll talk to him till Colonel Grayle comes in."

"Mr. Bannerman has moved into rooms of his own," the servant told me, yielding ground reluctantly.

I walked into Grayle's smoking-room and left the man to warn him that I was in effective occupation and that he must yield to the inevitable and come down to see me, if he were already at home, or submit to a few minutes of my company when he returned. A moment later I saw that he could not yet have come back from the House, as a pile of letters awaited him on the table and the whiskey and soda set out for his refreshment were untouched. "A model servant," I said to myself, "to have everything ready when you do not expect your master home." I mixed myself a drink and was preparing to light a cigar when I found that I was without matches. On going into the hall, I found my sleek, glib friend mounting guard, as though he expected me to slip out with my pockets full of silver.

He produced a box of matches and struck one for me. As I began to light my cigar, a taxi drove into the square and drew up opposite the house.

"What name shall I tell Colonel Grayle?" asked the servant, as he held open the smoking-room door for me.

Before I had time to answer, I heard a latch-key grating in the lock; the servant moved forward and stopped irresolutely; then the door opened to admit Mrs. O'Rane. Our eyes met for a moment, and for the first time since I had known her I saw her out of countenance. In another moment it was all over, for I had backed into the smoking room and pushed the door closed. I heard her clear, rather high voice asking whether Colonel Grayle was home yet.

The servant murmured something in reply, and I caught the sound of his footsteps growing fainter along the flagged passage. Mrs. O'Rane turned the handle and came in to me, once more self-possessed and in control of herself; there was neither embarrassment nor defiance in her manner; she greeted me as she had once before greeted me, when I first met her at "The Sanctuary."

"I hope you've not been waiting long," she said. "Vincent's usually home by this time. There's not an all-night sitting or anything, is there?"

"Not so far as I know," I answered. "Mrs. O'Rane, I don't think I'll stay any longer."

She looked at my newly lighted cigar and untouched whiskey and soda.

"It's just as you like," she said. "It seems a pity to run away without seeing him, though. I presume you came to see him and not me?"

"I came to see him. I didn't know you were here."

"But I've been here the whole time. Didn't you know that?"

"We didn't."

"But where else was I likely to be?"

"Your husband never suspected that Grayle had any hand in it. I fancy you and Grayle did your best not to enlighten him. You let him think it was another man, and Grayle gave an alibi. I suppose it was all right; I'm not versed in the ethics of the thing."

I made a step towards the door, but Mrs. O'Rane was in my way.

"Yes, I don't know why Vincent said that," she observed reflectively. "Unless he thought that nobody was ever going to know. . . . But I'm not *quite* so abandoned as that. I warned you all, I told you my old married life was over; and I was free to start another. As for not enlightening anybody, it's not my business to correct all the mistakes people choose to make. . . . Now that you've been here, you can report everything you've seen. *I'm* not hiding anything, and you can say I'm not ashamed of

what I've done and I'm quite prepared for all the world to know. He can divorce me as soon as he likes."

The discussion did not make me want to stay any longer in the house, and I had to ask her to let me pass.

"You can tell him that," she added carelessly.

"I don't know that he contemplates divorcing you," I said. "He's never mentioned the subject."

"But he'll have to. He can't go on being nominally married to me, when I'm—well . . ."

"Are you sure you don't mean that your own position will be a shade less discreditable when Grayle marries you?" I asked. "Frankly, you haven't been thinking of your husband very much, have you?"

She sighed impatiently.

"You will keep on speaking of him as my husband."

"He is."

"Until he divorces me."

"Unless he divorces you," I substituted.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LIMITS OF LOYALTY

"O knights and lords, it seems but little skill
To talk of well-known things past now and dead.

God wot I ought to say, I have done ill,
And pray you all forgiveness heartily!
Because you must be right, such great lords; still

Listen, suppose your time were come to die,
And you were quite alone and very weak;
Yea, laid a dying while very mightily

The wind was ruffling up the narrow streak
Of river through your broad lands running well;
Suppose a hush should come, then some one speak;

'One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,
Now choose one cloth for ever; which they be,
I will not tell you, you must somehow tell

Of your own strength and mightiness; here, see!'
. . . . . .

After a shivering half-hour you said;
'God help! heaven's colour, the blue'; and he said, 'hell.'
Perhaps you would roll upon your bed,

And cry to all good men that loved you well,
'Ah, Christ! if only I had known, known, known . . .'"

WILLIAM MORRIS: *The Defence of Guenevere.*

I

When I first met Sir Aylmer Lancing, I was a very young and very impecunious member of the Diplomatic Service; he was in early middle life and a millionaire many times over. It was a time of mental green-sickness with me, when I had an undergraduate's morbid craving for ideas,

something of an undergraduate's contempt, too, for those to whom ideas made no appeal. In describing Sir Aylmer as a man without ideas, I am saying something which he would have endorsed and interpreted to mean far more than I intended. He had no ideas outside his business, though within it he shewed a deliberate, dogged objectivity, the sublimation of commonsense, which was staggering and irresistible as a battering-ram. I have met no one with whom the essential was so invariably the obvious. One day, when we were crossing together to America, I asked him what were the qualities which made most for success in any career. He answered, for all the world like the tritest of stage millionaires, "Always know what you want and go for it; always be quite clear about what's going on in your own mind."

Lancing left an estate of over twenty millions; I had made before the war about two hundred thousand pounds; despite the difference I boldly affirm that the first intellectual quality for success is an ability to know what is going on in other people's minds. Bertrand Oakleigh has the quality in a high degree. I made fun of him, indeed, over many years, because he was so oracular. At his house in Princes Gardens, in the Smoking-Room and at the Club he would sit looking up at the ceiling with a long black cigar jutting defiantly from under his heavy walrus moustache, always a little more profound and unhurried than the rest of us, always armed with a general principle, always ready with a philosophic theory, sometimes paradoxical and usually pretentious. But, when he dropped what George once called his "sneers and graces," forgot to be prejudiced or pontifical, he was shrewdly intelligent. Had he been less indolent, less fond of gossip, less detached and content to be the amused spectator, he could have made a considerable political position for himself, for he had a rare faculty of hearing innumerable opinions on the same subject, melting them down, so to say, and producing a prophecy. But, as he grew older, he would not

take the trouble to think for himself or to ascertain what others were thinking.

I went to him for advice on the results of my visit to Grayle's house in Milford Square.

"Well, I take it that the one person we're interested in is David," he said by way of giving me a lead.

The remark was characteristic of his love for O'Rane, but I am afraid it was also indicative of his general aversion from women and of his dislike for Mrs. O'Rane in particular, a dislike which dated back to a time long anterior to her marriage. I was weakly ready to go farther and interest myself in her, too, if only on account of her youth and an obstinate belief that youth has a good title to happiness.

"Well, we're looking for the best solution," I suggested, "not meting out justice. Grayle and Mrs. O'Rane are waiting for O'Rane to file a petition. That was her message. Now, O'Rane's never said whether he'll divorce her or not; probably he hasn't made up his mind, and certainly I don't know his views on divorce. She's in an impossible position—socially—as long as she lives with Grayle without marrying him; and Grayle's position will be very uncomfortable as soon as the story gets about. It's enough to spoil his political career; whereas he'll live it down, if there's a conventional divorce and he lies quiet for a few months. If O'Rane wants to take his revenge, he need only refuse to set her free."

"He's not looking for revenge," said Bertrand oracularly.

"Then you'd say—anyone would say—that the kindest and most generous thing he could do would be to divorce her. I'm only uncertain because I know something of Grayle; I presume he'll marry her, but, when the honeymoon period's over, he'll make her supremely unhappy. Perhaps that's no more than she deserves, but, if O'Rane thought she'd be unhappy by marrying Grayle, conceivably he might exercise his power to prevent it."

"Conceivably he might," Bertrand assented dryly.

"Well, those are the alternatives—to divorce or not to divorce. I'm amazed to find how well the secret's been kept, but it can't be kept indefinitely. It happened to be me last night, but Tom, Dick or Harry might just as well have made the discovery. Any day now you may have a nauseating scandal. We none of us want that, and O'Rane does nothing to stop it."

For a moment Bertrand dropped his omniscient manner and shrugged his shoulders with slow helplessness.

"What do you suggest he *can* do?" he asked.

"Have the minor scandal of a divorce—I regard that as less bad than the common knowledge that she's been living for weeks, months, years with a man who's not her husband,—get it over quickly and give people a chance of forgetting it. If he won't do that, let him see if he's got any power to keep them from living together. I don't think he has. Grayle has sufficient money, his position's not big enough to make him susceptible to blackmail——"

"You may take it that David's got no power," Bertrand interrupted.

"Well, it's your turn," I said a little impatiently.

Bertrand stroked his moustache and closed his eyes sleepily.

"I'll answer your specific question. You know who she's living with and you can tell David or not, as—you—like. It won't make a pennyworth of difference," he added cheerfully. "You see, there's one thing you're leaving out, Stornaway, the only thing that matters. David wants her back. I could see that on the day itself, when he'd caught them, when she decamped. . . . Nothing on earth will make him divorce her—for purely selfish reasons, if you like; he can't and won't let her go. But I don't know that you'll do much good by putting a pistol of that kind at her head. I've known that young woman on and off for about ten years. I don't see her knocking at the door and saying, 'Oh, by the way, as I can't live with the man I want to, I've come back.' Your general question what to do I can't answer. At least, we can only go on waiting——"

"And praying that other people won't find out?" I asked.

"They will, I'm afraid. Well, Sonia's utterly reckless, I gather; *she* doesn't care who knows. Grayle *wouldn't* have cared in the old days. When he was living with her predecessor—you know, the wife of the man in the Brazilian Legation;—Grayle's so untidy in his amours; they always overlap—it was common property, they went almost everywhere together, she took the head of his table. Since those happy, careless times Grayle has discovered political ambitions. From the fact that not more than a handful of people know, I judge that Grayle wants to keep the thing quiet; I'm prepared to bet that Grayle would like best of all to be free of the whole tangle and, if he can't do that, he'd like the divorce to come on as quickly as possible. There's another thing you've left out. Do you suppose Grayle had contemplated a scandal, a divorce, the necessity of marrying the woman?"

"I don't suppose anyone in his position sits down and thinks it out in cold blood," I said.

Bertrand opened his left eye and looked at me with a malicious smile; then closed it and opened the right.

"Some do, some don't," he answered. "That's been my experience. I don't much mind your healthy incontinent animal, but I hate your continent calculating man—the creature who regulates his passions by his fears. He's artificial, to start with, and he's dangerous. Now, I sit here like the sailor's parrot. Grayle is becoming the calculating animal, Grayle for the first time in his life feels that he has a reputation to lose, Grayle is combining disreputable tastes with a decorous exterior."

Bertrand paused to chuckle cynically.

"Well?" I said.

"Well? Everybody seems to leave out one thing in his calculations, and Grayle was no exception. I put it to you a moment ago that he never contemplated the position he's in now; I suggest that Grayle saw a very beautiful young woman and decided, as you'd expect of him, that she was fair prey. He studied her carefully. She wasn't

to be bought, because throughout her life she's been receiving everything and giving nothing in return; she wasn't to be drugged, because her head's strong and her nature's cold; she wasn't to be cajoled—Beresford was doing the chivalrous devotion business, and she treated him like a tame cat, which is what he was;—Grayle discovered that the only thing to do was to bully her. He went away, neglected her, snubbed her when they met—enough to mortify her without even suggesting he cared enough to *try* and hurt her,—shewed her quite plainly that he could get on without her. Down she came with a run and began to make advances to him. He was too busy to waste time on her. She was piqued, she began to throw herself at him until at last he got her into his power. . . . I don't know who made her think she'd any cause to be jealous of Miss Merryon; it may have been Grayle, she may have evolved it for herself to excuse her leaving her husband; certainly she lashed herself into thinking it was all true, and that was Grayle's opportunity. But, once more, he never thought of anything more than a passing intrigue, which would have been easy enough with the husband away three months at a time. Unfortunately the husband turned up unexpectedly just as the intrigue began, and that lifted everything on to a much higher plane. Grayle cut and ran like a boy caught robbing an orchard—to be followed a couple of hours later by the woman." Once off the subject of O'Rane, Bertrand was enjoying himself prodigiously. "I would have given something to see his face when she arrived. Now, in my experience, there are mighty few crimes and cruelties that the female won't commit to protect the male—the male she's interested in;—she'll lie and thieve—and we've probably both of us seen her fixing the blame on the wrong man, letting him be cited as co-respondent to save her lover. Well, Beresford was sacrificed to protect Grayle; Grayle himself, who'd stayed behind in England to carry out the intrigue, used the excuse of his mission to the Front to cover his tracks. For two months and more he's contrived to keep the thing secret. Do you imagine

he isn't ready—however much infatuated about her he may be or may have been—to get rid of her and start again unembarrassed? When we talk about lifelong devotion, we none of us expect to be taken at our word."

Bertrand opened his eyes to look at me, and I saw that he was shaken with noiseless chuckles of malice. I could not share in his merriment.

"I don't see how this helps," I said. "*She* wants a divorce, *he* wants to get rid of her, and O'Rane—she *won't* come back to him, and, if she did, I can't conceive of his taking her back."

"Then you don't know David and you've not had much experience of young men in his state of mind," answered Bertrand with assurance. "In the meantime you can do nothing and you'd better wait till the story begins to get round London. It may be weeks or it may be months, but that little scandal is not going to lie hid for ever."

In spite of Bertrand there was one thing that I could do, and I did it when next I met O'Rane. It was intolerable, to my way of thinking, that he should be allowed to meet Grayle in ignorance of the blow which Grayle had dealt him. To do the fellow justice, I had never seen him seeking O'Rane's company either before or after, but I could not stomach the idea that O'Rane might unsuspectingly join him at dinner or even bid him good-night. I broke the news on my autumn visit to Melton. As soon as I approached the subject, O'Rane's face grew rigid; when I had finished, he said, "Oh, that was it? I see. Thank you."

Our brief meeting took place in October, and I do not know whether O'Rane came more than once to London until the Christmas holidays. I did not see him, certainly, and I have never heard whether he ran across Grayle. About a week after our meeting, I happened to be dining with the Maitlands and once more found Grayle among my fellow-guests. Until that moment I had not tried to think what line of conduct I should follow on meeting him; I do not yet know what is the conventional course. When

Lady Maitland went to the drawing-room, however, and he moved unconcernedly into the chair next mine, I had no difficulty in arriving at a decision. Grayle was middle-aged, rich, of unimpaired physique; he had tasted most kinds of enjoyment, his life had been brutishly happy and brutally successful; this last intrigue meant as little to him as a kiss snatched from an unreluctant dairymaid. It meant more to O'Rane.

I waved away the decanter which Maurice Maitland was pressing upon me and asked if he would make my apologies to his wife and allow me to slip away unobserved to finish some work which I had been compelled to take home. A day or two later I entered the House as Grayle was leaving it. He turned back and requested the favour of three minutes' conversation with me.

"I just want to understand," he began with an outward show of reason and an underlying menace. "I knew you knew, of course, but I didn't suspect you of so much melodrama. Am I to take it that you don't want to meet me?"

I am afraid that the threatening high voice left me undaunted.

"Grayle," I said, "you must admit you've been a pitiful, heartless cad over this."

"You don't want to meet me?" he repeated. "I only want to be sure of my ground."

"You remembered, of course, that O'Rane was blind?" I went on.

He dropped the menace and assumed an expression of mild perplexity.

"I'm afraid I don't follow where you come in in all this," he said, running his fingers through his luxuriant flaxen hair. "I'm quite ready to meet O'Rane here or—elsewhere. If he *likes* to plead blindness as an excuse, he can."

"And you will only plead it as an opportunity," I said. "Frankly, Grayle, I never want to see you or hear of you or speak to you again. And I wish I could find someone less fat and flabby to horsewhip you."

So a forty years' acquaintance ended. We spoke as and when we found ourselves members of the same company, but I was only to meet him once again in private and only to hold private communication with him twice. Perhaps I was too busy to frequent the places where I was likely to see him; perhaps, and more probably, he was living in comparative retirement.

During October and November I was constrained to watch the fulfilment of Bertrand's prophecy. The fact that Mrs. O'Rane was living apart from her husband, if not the fact that she was living with someone else, could not be concealed indefinitely. I had entered their social group so recently that I could not count more than half a dozen or a dozen friends in common, but in the course of those two months I heard many references that indicated suspicion or at least curiosity. Lady Maitland, I remember, shook her massive head and told me that it was a great pity for Colonel Grayle and Mrs. O'Rane to be still going about together so much; she had hoped that all that nonsense was over. . . . Lady Pentyre had heard that there was some estrangement . . . And one night, when I was dining at Bodmin Lodge, young Deganway, who prided himself on the range of his social information, peered knowingly through his eyeglass and asked our host whether the famous Mrs. O'Rane did not hail from his part of the country. I forget what answer Pebbleridge made, but Deganway started talking with fine mystery about a certain member of Parliament who should be nameless. . . . George Oakleigh interrupted him by asking if he knew her.

"I *do*," he added significantly.

"Well, but is it true?" Deganway demanded resiliently.

"I haven't heard the story yet," George answered. "I don't know that I particularly want to."

His tone was not sufficiently discouraging to closure the discussion, and Pebbleridge observed that he had not heard the story either. I felt that it was time to intervene.

"I've heard *a* story," I said. "If Deganway and I mean

the same thing, there's nothing in it. She used to be rather a friend of yours, usen't she, Deganway?"

"Oh, I've known her for years," he answered imperviously and impenitently.

George and I walked part of the way home together along Knightsbridge.

"It can't go on, you know," he exclaimed. "We had a frontal attack from Lady Dainton to-day. She called at 'The Sanctuary' on her way to Waterloo and was mildly surprised to find me in possession and very fairly staggered when I said Sonia was away and that I didn't know her address. Between us we managed to shut Deganway up to-night, but the story's being circulated by other people as well. I deny it, of course. . . . And I've seen Sonia with him three times in ten days."

I wondered whether she was trying to force his hand —and her husband's.

"Grayle's probably meeting the story, too," I said. "I wonder how he likes it."

"He must have been through this sort of thing so many times!" George sighed.

"But I doubt if he wants to be the hero of a *cause célèbre* at this moment," I suggested. "The political position is becoming very interesting."

A few days before I had found myself at a political meeting in the City. We were assembled to demand a "ton-for-ton" policy of compensation for the merchant shipping which was being sunk by German submarines, and my seat on the platform was next to Guy Bannerman's.

"Grayle couldn't come, so I'm representing him," he explained. "You may imagine his hands are pretty full at present."

"I can well imagine it," I said, "though I don't go out of my way to meet him nowadays." Guy looked at me enquiringly to see how much I knew. "The last time I was at Milford Square I was told that you'd moved into quarters of your own."

Guy nodded abstractedly.

"You know, I don't think you've heard the whole story," he said.

"I've heard more than I want to," I replied, as I began to consult the programme of the afternoon's proceedings.

"Ah, but only on one side. There was such provocation——"

I laid my hand on Guy's knee.

"That was good enough for her, but it won't do for me," I said. "I've no doubt Grayle worked it up very convincingly, but you're far too clever to be taken in by it and not half clever enough to impose on me. We both of us know that it's impossible to say a single word for either of them. There we'd better leave it. It can't be undone now."

We were interrupted by the chairman's introductory speech, but at the end of the meeting Guy took my arm and walked with me to Cannon Street Station.

"I'm *not* trying to defend them," he said. "In a thing like this no outsider can give an opinion worth having. I'm only saying that you might be a bit more lenient, if you'd heard both sides."

"It can't be undone now," I repeated.

As we seated ourselves in the train, he asked me if I had any idea what O'Rane proposed to do.

"Did Grayle tell you to find out?" I enquired.

"Of course he didn't," was the indignant rejoinder.

"But he *would* be interested to know," I suggested. "Well, I can't help you, Guy. O'Rane has not told me; he has not told anyone, so far as I am aware. Why don't you interview him on the subject?"

Though Guy is a friend, I could not help being a little brutal to him in manner; I have always admired his loyalty to Grayle, but at this moment it was a quality which alienated me from him.

"It's no business of mine," said the faithful squire. "I don't know O'Rane, but I can't imagine any man sitting down under this sort of thing."

"Is Grayle so desperately keen on a divorce?"

"I've never met anyone who went through the Divorce Court for *love* of the thing," he answered.

2

Half-way through November O'Rane returned to London for the mid-term Leave Out. I was apprised of his arrival by a telephone message begging me to cancel any other engagements and dine with him informally at "The Sanctuary."

It was Saturday night, and I stayed in London to meet him. George and Bertrand were his other guests, and we dined at one end of the long refectory table on the dais, with the rest of the room lit up only by the flicker of the two fires, which sent shapeless, indeterminate shadows dancing up and down the panelled walls. It is usually as easy to detect when a woman lives in a house as when a house has been unoccupied for months. The library was perhaps tidier than Mrs. O'Rane used to leave it; otherwise it was unchanged, but it had become indefinably masculine. O'Rane was as quiet and self-possessed as I had always found him, but now without the noticeable effort which I had observed at our last two or three meetings. As might be expected, we talked throughout dinner of the war and of political changes in the House of Commons. Only when we were gathered round one fire with our coffee and cigars did he turn the conversation on to himself.

"I must apologise for spoiling your week-end," he said, addressing himself to me, "I had to take the opportunity of seeing you when I could. All three of you have been amazingly kind and amazingly discreet and sympathetic. It's—my funeral, of course, but I wanted you to be present. George, perhaps you're the best person——"

There was a silence of some moments, while George turned his cigar round in his mouth and stared at his boots.

"I only know what you asked me to do, Raney," he

began diffidently. And then to us, "O'Rane told me to fix up a meeting with Sonia. I went round to Milford Square last night and told her that he wanted to—discuss the future, I think I said. Grayle was present. She said she'd come, if he came with her; and I arranged for half-past ten to-night."

He stopped with obvious relief. O'Rane was standing with his back to the fire, rocking gently from heel to toe, with his hands in his trouser pockets. I saw him put his watch to his ear, touch the repeater and smile.

"It's not ten yet," he said to Bertrand and me. "If you'd rather be out of it. . . . I got George to attend as my second and I wanted you two to be—well, to hear what we said and keep us cool. I've been thinking over this business pretty steadily for some months and I feel it can't go on. My idea about marriage—well, to begin with, people mustn't marry unless they feel they can't get on without each other. . . . If they find they've made a hopeless mistake, nothing to my way of thinking justifies spoiling two lives by keeping them coupled together. Sonia knows that, I've always told her so. . . . Well, no one could find anything to say for our present position, it's neither one thing nor the other. If Sonia's made her choice——"

He broke off and shrugged his shoulders. Bertrand turned his eyes away from the boy's face and gazed slowly round the long, warm, softly-lighted room. George had discovered a spot of grease on the sleeve of his uniform and was industriously scraping it with the end of a wooden match.

"Go on, O'Rane," I said as gently as I could. "We haven't got much time. She's coming here, and you're going to ask her what she means to do."

He nodded almost gratefully.

"Yes. If she tells me coolly and dispassionately—that's why I've got you men here; I don't want a scene—that she'll be happier with Grayle——" I saw his underlip tremble before he could get out the name—"After all, it's her happiness . . . isn't it?"

There was another pause.

"You'll set her free?" I suggested.

"I suppose so," he whispered.

I looked at Bertrand, and he first shrugged his shoulders and then shook his head. The first gesture seemed to mean that he did not mind what was said, the second that he himself did not propose to say it.

"You will divorce her?" I went on to O'Rane. "I only want you to see all sides of the question. It's not—pleasant, but—if she wants it and you're ready to face it on both your accounts . . . There will be a big scandal, O'Rane. She's very well known in society. And any Member of Parliament, even if he wasn't as notorious as Grayle . . . It will make good copy for the papers, I'm afraid."

"I'd save Sonia from it, if I could," said O'Rane, moistening his lips. "Of course, if Grayle doesn't mind——"

"I should think he'd mind very much," I interrupted. "If he doesn't want to appear in the Divorce Court just now ——"

"He should have thought of that before," said O'Rane grimly. Then he held out his hands in entreaty. "You don't suggest I can let it go on any longer? Most people would say it had gone on too long, that if I'd had a spark of pride—*I can't.* Try to imagine if *your* wife . . . Thinking of it night and day, night and day, forgetting for a moment when you're asleep and then waking up fresh to it every morning . . ." His hands stole up and pressed his temples as though they were bursting. "You lie for a moment wondering what it is that's hanging over you," he whispered, "and then you remember. . . . And you forget again for a moment when you're working or people are talking to you . . . but you always know it's there . . . and it comes back—comes back with a stab in the middle of whatever you're doing. . . . And *they* mustn't see. . . . God knows, a divorce won't alter things much, but at least it's a definite break, I've given her up, I've got no

claim, no rights. . . . It can't go on any longer. Have—have all you men got something to smoke?"

He came quickly forward from the fire-place and touched his way to a table behind our chairs. Though his back was turned, I could see out of the corner of one eye that he was furtively wiping his forehead with the back of his hand.

"If by any chance they don't want a divorce, will you insist on it?" I went on unsparingly.

"Of course not. Provided they separate. You don't imagine——"

"If they do? If your wife asks you to forgive her and have her back?"

O'Rane had never smoked, I have been told, since his blindness; he could no longer taste the tobacco nor keep it alight. I observed him now putting a cigar in his mouth and chewing the end.

"It's not very likely to arise," he said.

"But if it did?"

"I'll wait till it arises."

He came back to his old place on the hearth-rug, and we remained silent until the clock struck half-past ten. At the sound I could see the others growing tense and expectant, as I was doing. O'Rane had been whistling through his teeth, but he abandoned even this distraction. For myself, uncomfortable as I knew us all to be, I could not help thinking that Mrs. O'Rane and Grayle could be hardly free from all feelings of embarrassment. To return to the house, which had been given as a wedding present sixteen months before, accompanied by the lover with whom she had left it, to meet her husband and discuss how he proposed to deal with her infidelity—the bare bones were enough without clothing them in imagination. I pictured Mrs. O'Rane giving the familiar directions to the driver, tapping on the window when he lost himself in trying to take short cuts through the streets of Westminster, stopping him at the door and being helped out by Grayle. . . . And Grayle, for all his seasoning, had never,

I was very sure, been led by the wife into her husband's house and presence. . . .

I scribbled on an envelope and handed it to George:

"Couldn't they have pitched on some other place?"

"I wanted a private room in an hotel—neutral ground," he wrote back. "Raney insisted on this. Moral effect, I suppose."

As I crushed the paper into my pocket, I reflected that O'Rane was taking risks. The sight of the room and of himself might act on his wife like the smell of blood on an animal.

The clock struck again, and I exchanged glances with Bertrand. It was so characteristic of Mrs. O'Rane, even in my short acquaintance with her, that she should be late on such an occasion.

"You *did* say to-night, didn't you?" O'Rane asked, trying to keep his tone unconcerned.

"I don't suppose they've been able to get a taxi," George answered. "It was raining before dinner."

A moment later we grew tense and expectant once more at the sound of an engine. I heard the slam of a door and Grayle's voice saying, "Will you wait a bit?" Then Bertrand, George and I rose from our chairs, as the flame-coloured curtain was drawn aside and Mrs. O'Rane walked composedly into the room, with Grayle in his staff uniform a pace behind. She narrowed her eyes and then raised her brows almost imperceptibly when she saw who was present.

"I'm sorry if we've kept you all waiting," she said, as she slipped her arms out of her coat and handed it to Grayle.

O'Rane swallowed.

"Won't you sit down?" he murmured.

George and I each pulled an extra chair into the half-circle, and I watched Mrs. O'Rane settling herself. Presumably she must have started the evening pale, for her cheeks were slightly rouged—and I had not observed her to use rouge before. Her eyes, too, looked tired, as I had seen them at our chance meeting in Hyde Park several

months before, but she was perfectly controlled, and I could trace no sign of nervousness or embarrassment. As though she were shewing herself off to young Beresford or any other of her admirers, I saw her look down at the pink dress which she was wearing, smooth a crease out of one glove, lift one transparent sleeve higher on to her shoulder and settle the folds of her skirt. Grayle spent some moments laying her coat carefully across the back of a chair; then dropped on to the end of a sofa with his stiff leg rigid in front of him and began peeling off his gloves and tossing them into his cap. He, at least, was not at ease; and, when George picked up the cigar-box and offered it him, he stammered in his refusal.

There was a moment more of silence, and then we turned slowly and with one accord towards O'Rane. As though he felt our eyes upon him, he tossed the cigar behind him into the fire and faced his wife.

"I—George probably told you, Sonia—I'm spending the week-end in London. I thought we might discuss things a bit."

Mrs. O'Rane looked unhurriedly to left and right.

"By all means." she acquiesced. "Do we want—*quite* all these——?"

"I should have preferred to meet you alone. As Colonel Grayle said he was coming——"

"He had a right to come. Of course, if you prefer everything dragged up in public . . ."

She shrugged her shoulders and began to play with the watch on her wrist.

"I think everyone here is acquainted with most of the facts," said O'Rane. "But I'm not proposing to drag up anything that's happened. I asked you to come here because I wanted to talk about the future. I expect everyone will agree that the present position can't continue."

He waited for a sign of assent. Mrs. O'Rane took off one glove and helped herself to a cigarette from the gold case at her wrist.

"I told Mr. Stornaway that you were at liberty to di-

vorce me," she said with a glance in my direction. "I said I was willing to face it. I don't know whether you ever got the message."

I decided to watch Grayle, but he was sitting with his head back, staring at the ceiling and occasionally blowing elongated smoke-rings.

"The Divorce Court is—an unsavoury place," O'Rane observed. "I want you to believe, Sonia, that what I've always said is as true now as when I first said it. I put your happiness higher than anything in the world, I'm trying to leave myself out of this."

Mrs. O'Rane looked once at her husband, and her eyes seemed to harden; then she glanced without apparent purpose at the half of the room which was within her field of vision. I noticed for the first time that the flower-vases were empty; I fancy that she noticed it, too. Her mouth began to purse, and I knew that O'Rane would have done better to hold his meeting elsewhere.

"It's very kind of you," she said stiffly. "Isn't it rather late in the day for you to be thinking of my happiness? When I lived here—— But you said you didn't want to go into what was past. The future's simply in your hands. I've told you I'm willing to face it. I don't believe in this modern business of the man always letting himself be divorced by the woman. I'm—willing—to face it. You've got your witnesses; they'll stand by you, if anybody criticises you."

"But if I don't *want* to see you in the Divorce Court, Sonia?"

"I'm afraid that's one of the things you can't help."

O'Rane's chin dropped on to his chest, and he began to pace up and down the ten-foot rug in front of the fire with his hands plunged into his pockets and his fists so tightly clenched that the knuckles of either hand stood out in four sharp lumps against the sides of his trousers. Grayle still sat like a husband reluctantly dragged to hear a dull sermon; Mrs. O'Rane set herself to light a second cigarette from the glowing stump of the first, leaning forward so

that the ash should not scatter over the pink dress. A quarter past eleven struck, and I remember that Bertrand and I gravely consulted our watches and pretended to compare them by the clock on the mantel-piece.

At last O'Rane halted by Grayle's chair.

"You're in this, too, Colonel Grayle," he said. "Once more we need concern ourselves only with the future. I should like to hear your views."

Grayle brought his head forward with a sharp jerk.

"It's her happiness we're considering," he agreed slowly, with his eyes on O'Rane's waist. "I—well, it's for her to say; I obviously can't tell you what will make her happiest, she's the only person who can do that. You've not put forward any case for yourself, I musn't put forward any for myself. She must tell us both whether she's been happy enough these last months to want to go on. . . . I may say—you haven't attacked me, so perhaps I don't need to defend myself—I may say that, when a woman's unhappily married, I don't regard her as being under any obligation to her husband; she's free to start her life again; and any man is free to share that life, if she sees fit. That—that's my *theory*, in case you feel there's any question of *rights* involved."

His tone was becoming truculent, but O'Rane nodded gravely.

"Yes. But we agreed to leave the past alone," he said. "I've knocked about a good bit the last thirty years and I can assure you that I never want to be put on my trial for *any*thing. Let's stick to the future. Do you wish—my wife to go through the Divorce Court?"

I looked at Mrs. O'Rane to see if the offending word would rouse her, but she seemed not to have heard it. The hard composure of her entrance had broken down, she seemed ready to faint with fatigue, and the patches of rouge on cheeks that were grown suddenly white gave her an absurd something of a Dutch doll's appearance. I fetched her a tumbler of soda-water, and her smile of thanks was the first human thing that I had seen about her

that night. As she began to sip it, I saw her glance over the brim at Grayle.

"I don't *wish* it," he said at length. "What—what else is possible?"

"You can say good-bye to her," O'Rane suggested quietly.

Grayle looked up uncomprehendingly; and Mrs. O'Rane's eyes flashed in sympathy.

"Desert her, you mean?"

"It's hardly the word I should have chosen, but we needn't go into that. Colonel Grayle, neither you nor I want a scandal. By the mercy of God, there's only one man outside this room who knows what's been taking place all these months. We've agreed that my wife's happiness is the thing that we're both unselfishly seeking, we won't bandy rights and wrongs or grievances or justifications—we won't even try to put our love for her into a scale. If you give me your word of honour that you'll never see or speak to my wife again, I will take no further steps; I'm not trying to steal her away from you so that I may get her back myself—she must determine her own happiness. You and I can at least spare her the unhappiness, the vulgarity, the morbid, sniggering curiosity of a public scandal. She can live in another part of the house, live away from me, let it be known confidentially that we somehow didn't manage to get on very well together. . . . Are you prepared to make that sacrifice for her happiness?"

Grayle lit another cigarette, coughed and fetched himself a syphon and tumbler.

"You're begging the question," he said at length. *"You* can't define the conditions of Sonia's happiness."

"I know what will make her *un*happy. That's good enough as a negative definition."

Mrs. O'Rane pushed her chair back a few inches and rose to her feet. She looked round for her coat and walked to the chair where Grayle had laid it.

"I've said I'm ready to face everything and everybody,"

she said over her shoulder, as she slipped her arms into the sleeves.

"But, please God! you don't know what you're facing!" O'Rane cried with an outburst of emotion which he was no longer able to contain. "Grayle, you *say* you love her! If you care a snap of the fingers for her, if you've any humanity, any decent feeling in the whole of your composition, if you hope for mercy in this world or the next, you've got your opportunity now! The one thing you can do for her abiding happiness is to take my hand and swear you'll never see her again. You know it is! You can walk out of this house and leave her so that no one will dare to say a word against her for fear of being thrashed within an inch of his life. If she doesn't get on well with me, if we part by common consent, that's my fault; everyone will say that I was always eccentric, that she was a fool to marry me, that I've spoiled her life. . . . Will you do that, Grayle? Will you shew that what you call your love for her means something?"

As he ended, I heard a muffled banging on the front door. George hurried away, and a moment later there came the sound of an engine starting.

"It was only the taximan," he explained, as he came back. "He's got a train to catch at Victoria, so I paid him off. We can telephone for another one when it's wanted."

Mrs. O'Rane looked at her watch and frowned.

"I *wish* you hadn't done that, George," she cried petulantly. "It was pouring when we came, and now we shall probably have to walk home. . . . I don't see that there's anything more to be said. It's very kind of everyone to take so much trouble about me, but, if I'm prepared to go through with it, that ends the matter."

"But you're talking about something you don't understand, Sonia!' cried O'Rane.

"Perhaps I understand better than you think," she answered. "It's just conceivable that Vincent and I both thought about the consequences beforehand. Good-bye."

She turned to the door, and Grayle followed her. George

moved mechanically forward to open it for them. Bertrand and I remained where we were, watching O'Rane smooth back a wisp of black hair that was glued to his forehead.

3

It was characteristic of O'Rane that he went back to Melton at the end of his leave without hinting to anyone what he was going to do. After his wife and Grayle left "The Sanctuary," I waited for perhaps ten minutes to see whether he wanted my opinion or advice, but he made no reference to the scene at which we had all been present. All that he said to the Oakleighs was, "Well, I'm rather tired. I think I shall go to bed." He disappeared as quietly and suddenly as he had come; perhaps we were to see him back in six weeks' time at the end of term, but even this was uncertain.

The advent of autumn, bringing with it the recognition that there must be another winter in the trenches, roused the country from the uncaring optimism or placid resignation in which the summer had been passed. In the London press, at the Club, in the House and at private dinner tables, I found very general agreement that the war had entered upon a new phase. A timid minority earnestly confided to discreetly chosen audiences that the people who talked about a deadlock and a stale-mate peace were proving right after all. With the exception of Beresford, who thought no opinion worth holding unless he shouted it from the house-tops, the new peace-school was obviously frightened of being called unpatriotic or pro-German. Bertrand would shake his head gloomily and begin sentences half-jocularly with—"I suppose I shall be called the Hidden Hand next, but all I can say is. . . ." Whatever it was, he said it in an undertone and made sure of his man before saying it. Others tried to avert personal attacks by discussing war and peace in the abstract, adducing uncertain historical parallels and wondering academically whether it

was wise to aim at humiliating a great country too much; were we not sowing the seeds of future wars?

The discussion seldom continued to be academic, and the peace school by its furtiveness and timidity invited persecution, as does the mild urchin at school who never stands up for himself and becomes a legitimate target for his fellows' kicks. Early in December there was much talk of the American "peace-kite." President Wilson had been re-elected, his hands were free, and for four years he could mould the policy of the United States without fear of an election. It was said that his patience was nearing its limits, that he was ready to break off diplomatic relations with Germany and that the "peace-kite" was a last attempt to arrive at terms of settlement before deciding to plunge his country into war.

The rumours of peace discussions and possible terms produced an immediate repercussion in London and developed a greater intensity of political feeling than had been known since the war began. There was said to be a peace-party in the Cabinet; the blunders and catastrophes of more than two years were set down to the malevolence of Ministers who had been driven to war against their will and were only anxious for an immediate end, even if such an end meant victory for the enemy; I heard once again Lady Maitland's confident assertion that the Government was in German pay. . . . There could be little academic discussion in such an atmosphere, and the one public attempt which I heard Bertrand make was literally shouted down.

"All I say," he kept repeating one night at Ross House, "is that I see no reason why we should be successful in 1917, when we've failed in 1916. I may be wrong; I don't pretend to have sufficient data. I only warn you that in six months' time you may have to accept worse terms than you could get now—with a balance of half a million or a million lives the wrong way. That's a big responsibility."

"You'd let Germany keep all she's got," Lady Maitland asked, "as an instalment?"

"Germany's broken, as it is," Bertrand answered. "She can never make good her losses and she'd gladly discuss terms. But, good Heavens! even if we didn't accept the terms, there's surely no harm in discussing them!"

Maitland shook his head sagely.

"When I'm dealing with the burglar who's collared my silver," he said, "I prefer not to argue until he's divested himself of what I believe is called the swag."

"You may *prefer* not to. Can you enforce your preference?" Bertrand asked rather curtly.

"Then let's go down fighting," Lady Maitland proposed valiantly.

"With great submission, a live dog's better than a dead lion," said Bertrand. "I've so much faith in the potentialities of my country that I want to preserve her."

Lady Maitland turned on him with unaffected ferocity.

"If you make peace now, you'll *disgrace* her!" she cried. "We shall never be able to hold up our heads again!"

Young Lady Loring, who was between Bertrand and me, was no less strong.

"Uncle Bertrand, you can't be serious!" she exclaimed. "We should be faithless to those who've died, if we didn't hold on. I—I would sooner have my husband killed a *second* time than go back on the dead!"

Her intensity of feeling caused a stir, followed by an embarrassed pause. Maitland brought it to an end by shaking his head good-humouredly.

"I say, Oakleigh, old man, if I may say so, you oughtn't to talk like that, you know. You're a man in a responsible position, people quote what you say. It produces a devilish bad impression."

My instinctive sympathy is always with the minority, and I came mildly to Bertrand's support.

"I agree with Oakleigh to this extent," I said. "All of us here are either women or men over military age. We ought to check the easy impulse to make *other* people fight to the bitter end."

"You won't hear any peace-talk at the Front," inter-

posed Maitland. "I've just come back from G.H.Q., you know."

Bertrand gave a snort of impatience.

"You won't find people lighting pipes in high-explosive factories," he answered. "It's against the rules. At the present time the policy of the war is dictated by people who can't conceivably be sent to carry it out. Stornaway's quite right. *We* fat old men sit at home and water the fields of Flanders with *other people's* blood. *We* say that, if *they* don't go on to the bitter end, there'll be another war in ten years. It's wrong, and we've been wrong every day we've gone on after we shewed the Germans that they couldn't overrun Europe at will. *I* went through the phase of dismembering Germany, deposing the Kaiser, commandeering the Fleet."

There was an unfortunate note of intellectual superiority in his voice, as though he alone had waded through the depths and shallows of folly and was at last (and alone) on dry land. His reward was immediate interruption by a chorus from every quarter of the table at once.

"Perhaps if you'd had a brother in solitary confinement for eight months because he called the guard a *Schweinhund,* which was the only word they'd given him a chance of learning——" began little Agnes Waring on my left with considerable heat.

"You wouldn't stir a finger to avenge Belgium?" demanded Lady Maitland.

"Oakleigh! Oakleigh!" her husband expostulated. "You're too old to fight yourself; for God's sake don't damp the ardour of those who can, those who'll go on till they've dictated their own peace terms—*in—Berlin,*" he ended proudly.

As the chorus subsided for want of breath, Frank Jellaby, who was now one of the Liberal Whips in the Coalition, allowed his incisive, nasal drawl to rise and dominate the table.

"The trouble about you, Oakleigh, is that you go through so many phases; we poor, benighted folk can't keep up

with you. There was a phase—quite a long one, for you —when any war with Germany was impossible, unthinkable. Didn't you run a paper to prove it? When the war came, someone twitted you in the House, and you made a personal statement—and a pretty complete recantation. You've been wrong here, wrong there. . . . If I may put it quite brutally, how are we to know you're not just as wrong now, how soon may we expect another personal statement?"

"Have all *your* prophecies been right?" Bertrand enquired.

"What prophecies have I made?" was the bland and temporarily safe rejoinder.

It was the one articulate effort which I heard at this time to determine the limits of military effort. It was derided and drowned; and from that—as we had to go on fighting—there was a short and easy road to criticism of present methods.

"We've put our hands to the plough," said Maitland placatingly, when the ladies had left us. "We can't turn back, Oakleigh. And I'm afraid I believe that the biggest trial's still ahead of us."

"And you're satisfied we shall come out of that any better?" Bertrand answered. "Your experience of the war leads you to expect that? God knows, the *men* don't lack courage or sticking-power, but can you find them generalship?"

"We must go on till we do."

Bertrand smoked for some moments in a reflective silence.

"It's a curious thing," he observed at length, "that a war of this size hasn't thrown up a single soldier of first-rate genius."

Maitland, for all that he had made the cleanest possible job of an Afghan raid and was now counter-initialling minutes in an extension of the War Office, took the criticism as personal.

"That is precisely what the soldiers say of you politicians," he retorted.

"The soldiers' job is to understand warfare and run a war," Bertrand propounded.

"The statesman's job is to govern," Maitland retaliated. "That's just what the Cabinet doesn't do and just what you M.P.'s don't make it do."

In the altercation which followed I listened to Maitland and watched Jellaby. The first acted as a barometer to mark the variations of average, prejudiced, unthinking opinion; it was the business of the second to follow the daily movement of the barometer. I did not need a second look at Jellaby to know that he was worried. He and I had talked in odd half-hours at the House about the possibility of attaining the objects for which we had entered the war; when our prospects were far brighter, Jellaby had been more rationally despondent, and I chose to think that his attack on Bertrand was an inspired attempt to suggest that any consideration of peace was at present out of the question and that a hard-pressed Government had better use for its time and energies than debating-society resolutions. He made no defence or comment, however, when Maitland developed a damaging attack on the Cabinet, and I fancied that he could not speak without indiscretion. Whether the Press reflected the public or the public reflected the Press, there was a widespread feeling that an ungainly cabinet of twenty-two talked incessantly and decided nothing, that countries were overrun and opportunities thrown away, because no one acted in time and that, paralysing as this collective lethargy so often and so tragically proved, it was still no check on the spasmodic and misdirected energy of individual members. Bertrand was one of a school which scented Press intrigue in every political development, but, as Grayle was credited with having said, "A Government which can't down Northcliffe can't down the Germans."

Of Grayle I saw nothing at this time, though a fresh crop of rumours told me that he was engaged once more on the

task which he had begun a year and a half before, after the battle of Neuve Chapelle. Watchful friends discovered him slipping in and out of the houses of Unionist ministers; there were tales of informal gatherings and chance week-end meetings at Brighton or on Shannon Wood golf-course.

"He wants a new coalition under Lloyd-George," Bertrand explained, "but the Tories aren't nibbling. You see, there's no popular cry that they can put up. George is at the War Office; if he and they can't make their will effective, they'd better resign like Carson, they mustn't proclaim their own impotence by whimpering. But they can't resign on the ground that the war's being mismanaged, because they're jointly and severally responsible for the mismanagement. There's no issue."

Later on he talked to me with a mixture of resignation and disappointment.

"If the Government falls, it will be simply because it doesn't know its own strength. It runs away every time anyone shakes a stick at it; it never says, 'Turn us out and be damned!' Meanwhile its authority is being sapped daily. . . . It's the old complaint I brought against it for eight years before the war. Ministers are so high and mighty that they never remember who it is that keeps 'em in power. 'Never explain, never complain!' It won't do! For months the Press has been urging that something must be done to raise fresh drafts after the Somme slaughter, that food prices must be controlled, that Ireland can't be left where she is. The Government goes about like Caesar's wife. . . . And everyone thinks it's doing nothing, and where should we be without Lord Northcliffe? And give us a Man! I don't know when or where the break will come, but I hear most ominous cracks."

The break came—unexpectedly, so far as I was concerned—in the first week of December. I say "unexpectedly," because I have yet to discover why the Government did not fall three months earlier or endure until three months later. Bertrand, who took on a new lease of life

when the days of crisis approached, told me that the point of cleavage was the question whether more troops should be sent to Salonica. True or false, this was obscured by an ultimatum in which the Secretary of State for War called for a Merovingian War Cabinet in which the Prime Minister was to have no place.

As I walked home from my office, the contents bills bore the legend, "England's Strong Man to Go." George Oakleigh and one or two others were dining with me, and by the time that I was dressed the news was being shouted in the streets that the Government had resigned. I suppose that I am as near to an Independent as the caucuses and the House of Commons will allow, but, though I had opposed the old Liberal administration in fully half of its measures, I felt a sentimental regret that the long rule was over. It closed an epoch to me at a time of life when I did not want to close epochs.

"I had four years of it at the beginning," said George unenthusiastically. "I'm afraid that in my youth and inexperience I hoped more of it than it was capable of giving. And I was rather glad to be out when the war came along. Beresford's quite right, you know; for seven or eight years the fate of this country was in the hands of three or four men who accepted our support and never gave us an inkling where they were taking us. Are *all* political rank-and-filers treated as cavalierly as we've been? It goes on right to the end. The Coalition came into existence without consulting the Liberal Party and now it's gone out—every bit as much on its own. You and I don't know why; there was no vote, no trial of strength. Nobody can say how many supporters anyone else can claim; there isn't even the usual man who's defeated the Government for the King to send for. They *have* treated the party like dirt! Now it remains to be seen whether an alternative Government *can* be formed."

That night and for a day or two afterwards London was filled with a greater political excitement than I can ever remember at any other time. Bertrand told me that,

in the interests of governmental and national unity, there had been a disposition to accept the terms of the ultimatum, but that a majority had decided that here at least a stand must be made.

"Now you simply *must* tell me what's happening!" young Deganway exclaimed when I met him dining late at the Club. "Bonar Law's been sent for, as you know, but I hear he's told the King he can't form a Government. That leaves only George. How much life do you give him? Three weeks? I want you to say three weeks, because I've got a fortnight bet on the other way with a man in the War Office and I'm rather inclined to hedge."

The next day it was announced officially that Mr. Bonar Law was unable to form a Government and that the King had sent for the Secretary of State for War. There was fresh furious speculation how short a time would suffice to shew that he would fail, as his predecessor had failed, but the speculation was incommoded by the intrusion of fact. Bertrand informed me that the Prime Minister-Elect had struck a bargain with Labour, but that the Liberal and Unionist members of the Coalition were refusing to serve under a man who had slain his master. I next heard that the Unionist attitude was modified, that it was felt the King's Government must be carried on, that pressure had been brought. . . .

"Of course, when once the rot sets in!" cried George Oakleigh, when we met by the tape-machine at the Club. He was undisguisedly disappointed, which was interesting. For eight or nine years I had heard from him plain and bitter criticism of the Government, but the old faith in his political idols had survived unexpectedly to make him forget the war and become the most excited of partisans. No terms were too strong to describe the treachery which had laid the Government low; his new-born good-will towards the dead Ministry was only exceeded by his blind antagonism to any alternative. "There was a day when Lloyd George could not get a man near him; then the Tories began to rat and everyone tried to elbow his way in before

his neighbour. . . . He'd got the liver in his pocket, everyone was afraid of being left out, the doors of the War Office weren't wide enough to let them all in. This latest development has rather disgusted me with politics. I shouldn't have minded, if it had been an ordinary peace-time political intrigue. I suppose I've been hoping for a higher standard since the war . . . gratitude—things of that kind. How are you going to vote, Stornaway? Bertrand keeps saying that he must support the *de facto* Government. Is that your view?"

"I want to see the *de facto* Government first," I said.

"You've an intelligent anticipation here," he answered, handing me a copy of the "Night Gazette." "Sir John Woburn can be relied on to have good stable information."

The first page of the paper contained a streaming headline—"Do It Now" or "Wait and See?" Underneath came an obviously inspired forecast of the new ministry with the old Unionist and Labour members back in place as to some eighty per centum of their numbers; the old Liberal office-holders were collectively abstaining, and their place in the party scale was filled by consequential nobodies and by the leaders of the Liberal "ginger group."

"If they've got rid of the brains, at least they've kept the dead-heads," George observed. "I don't see stability or long life here, Stornaway. Everyone knows that Woburn and the Press Combine turned the Coalition out, and now, before a single name has been submitted to the King, the Press Combine's at work devouring its own child. The new Ministry's too much tarred with the brush of the old, Balfour and Robert Cecil and the less feather-brained are to be pushed out of their offices some time before they get into them. It's going to be a very clean sweep."

I heard later that the attack on the elder Unionist statesmen was abandoned on the day when the Unionist party threatened to withdraw its support from the new Coalition unless newspaper attacks on its members ceased immediately.

"Is Grayle included?" I asked, as George drew an expressive finger down the draft list.

"He gets a new Ministry of Recruiting. At least, when I say that he gets it," George corrected himself, "this is quite unofficial, of course. He's suggested for it."

"I wonder if he'll get it," I said.

4

In London, more even than in the fabled Indian bazaar, the secret of to-day is the thrice-told tale of to-morrow. The same few thousand men and women migrate so regularly from one to another of the same few hundred houses that, if you let fall a piece of gossip at luncheon in Chesterfield Gardens, it will have taken wing to Portman Square and Hans Place by tea-time and will set tongues wagging over the dinner-tables of Westminster, Pall Mall and Piccadilly. By Saturday night the germ-carriers have spread themselves for a hundred miles to the west, north and south; before the week-end is over, the news may reasonably be expected to have reached Paris and, in these latter days, General Headquarters; and there has probably been more than one sly hint in the personal columns of the Sunday papers. Lady Maitland hears the story that very day at luncheon from the Duchess of Ross, who has met Gerald Deganway the night before at the Opera; *he* had been dining with Lady Pentyre, who had spent the week-end at Oxford with the Cutler-Blythes; young Haviland had come over to lunch on Sunday and had brought the story from All Souls'. . . .

Deganway's name appeared most regularly in these lists, but I doubt if he had the wit to invent scandal; he was content to collect and hand it on during the hours when his energies might have been more disastrously employed at the Foreign Office. It was from him that I first publicly heard even a rumour of Mrs. O'Rane's escapade; George Oakleigh and I succeeded in stopping his mouth, and for a few more precarious weeks Milford Square sank back to

its former insecure silence. Then the busy tongues got to work again, and within thirty-six hours I had heard six various accounts in as many places, starting with an early morning encounter in Hyde Park with my niece, who observed triumphantly, "*Now* I know why you haven't been talking about the great Sonia O'Rane the last few months."

"How much do you know, Yolande?" I asked.

"I heard yesterday that she'd run away," was the answer. "I wasn't told who with. . . . I can't say I was surprised."

At luncheon the name was supplied, unsupported by details, however. I was sitting next to Lady Pentyre, who welcomed me with even greater fervour than our old friendship warranted.

"I've been longing to see you!" she began eagerly. "You know Mrs. O'Rane, don't you? And you know Colonel Grayle. Well, is it true. . . .?"

"Is what true?" I asked, as she paused delicately.

Her full question was inaudible, but I caught the words "*chère amie.*"

"Ask someone who knows them better," I suggested. "I've hardly seen either for months."

There was less delicacy about Pebbleridge, when I dined with him; less still about Frank Jellaby, when I met him at the Club. To the party organiser moral depravity is of interest only in so far as it contributes to damage a hostile cause.

"Grayle's hardly chosen a fortunate moment for the double event," he observed gleefully.

I made it a rule in these days never to admit knowledge of the facts until I had discovered how much my antagonist knew. The House of Commons on this occasion was better informed than Pont Street, the County Club or Eaton Place.

"Well, you know, he's been living—for months, apparently—with Mrs. O'Rane? I'm told O'Rane is bringing a petition. It will rather cook Grayle's goose, if this all comes out just when he's waiting to be sent for. It'll be a

pretty bad case, from all accounts. You know O'Rane, don't you? Well, he lost his sight early in the war, which won't get Grayle much sympathy; and he was pretty newly married, which will appeal to the sentimental; and the whole business seems to have been conducted without any regard for human decency. Grayle used to go to the house as a friend, have them to his house, meet O'Rane in the Smoking-Room. . . . If he goes into the witness box, he'll be broken for all time, but, whether he goes in or not, he's dished himself for the present; even in war-time the Non-conformist Conscience wouldn't swallow a scandal of that kind. It's a bit ironical, isn't it? Like Parnell when he'd got Home Rule in the hollow of his hand. Grayle has done more to bring about this crisis than any six other men—including Northcliffe. He worked the Tories; he could call for anything he liked; and now you and I have only to wait for the story to get round a bit, and you'll find that Grayle's duties at the War Office are so important that he won't have time to attend the House, let alone taking a job." He laughed jubilantly. "Nemesis! Nemesis!"

"*If* the story is true," I said. "Where did you hear it?"

"Oh, everybody's talking about it! You don't suggest it's untrue?"

"I agree that everybody's talking about it, though that by itself doesn't make it true. Indeed, I've heard so many versions that I'm beginning to get confused. You say that O'Rane is bringing a petition? That's quite well-established? If so, this is the most convincing version that I've heard since lunch, because I don't suppose he would act on mere suspicion."

Jellaby looked up to the ceiling and pinched his chin thoughtfully between thumb and finger.

"I can give you my authority, I think. I was talking to several of the Lobby correspondents—it was that little man Palfrey, the fellow from the 'Night Gazette.' He told me that Grayle had been sent for all right, but not to be sounded for an office. This story was going about, and they wanted to know if it was true. I don't know where

Palfrey got his facts from, but he's usually very well informed. He told me quite definitely that O'Rane was applying for a divorce."

I hardly knew whether to be surprised or not. When I last saw O'Rane he did not seem to have made up his own mind. At first he had told us unmistakably that he would be driven to bring the marriage to an end, unless his wife and Grayle separated; later, when she was for a moment once more in his house, he forgot to threaten and expended himself in pleading, with an appeal to Grayle which I should have been unable to resist, if I had been in his place. Her voice and bodily presence, the memories of the few weeks when they had lived together there seemed to have killed any feeling of resentment and of personal interest; O'Rane was begging the two of them to spare him the necessity of an extreme step. He did not convince them, but, when I left, I was not sure that he had not convinced himself.

Jellaby was about to leave me, when I called him back.

"I want to ask a favour of you," I said. "Don't make party capital out of this—yet awhile, at least. I know all these people; and I should like you to hold your hand for the present. If the story's true, if the case comes into court, it's public property for the world to discuss. But, until then, don't spread a story which may not be true and, true or not, must be tolerably unpleasant for young O'Rane."

"But I'm not spreading it!" Jellaby protested. "Everybody seems to have heard of it except you."

"Everyone's heard of it at about fifteenth hand. Whether it's true or not is very simply tested by events. O'Rane's not likely to let his wife go *on* living with Grayle, if that's what she's doing now; if he takes action, you'll know your story's true; if he doesn't—well, for pity's sake don't even repeat such charges against a perfectly innocent woman."

The epithet made Jellaby wag his head at me very knowingly.

"There's no smoke without fire, you know, Stornaway," he said.

I cannot deal with debilitated minds which employ proverbs in place of arguments; Jellaby remained unanswered.

I had hardly got rid of him and ordered myself a glass of port wine, when a page-boy brought me a card and stated that Sir Roger Dainton was waiting in the hall and would like to see me for a moment. Now, I had been on nodding terms with Dainton a dozen years in and out of the House, but we had never attained greater intimacy, as I am temperamentally unable to suffer bores gladly. A call from such a man at nine o'clock in the evening could mean only one thing.

"Ask him, with my compliments, if he will join me in a glass of wine," I said.

Under his usual garb of awkward diffidence and universal apology, I could see that my visitor was perplexed and worried. For several moments I entirely failed to check his flow of regret at disturbing my dinner; when I silenced him with three interruptions and as many invitations to taste his wine and try some of my nuts, he planted his elbows impressively on the table, leaned forward, opened his lips and then flung himself back and swept our corner of the Coffee-Room for eavesdroppers.

"I hope there's nothing wrong," I said.

He planted his elbows in position a second time and abruptly covered his face with his hands.

"It's—incredible," he began. "My little girl—Sonia, you know Sonia? Have you heard about it?"

"I don't know what you're referring to yet," I pointed out.

"Sonia's run away from her husband!" he whispered uncomprehendingly. "She's gone off with another man. They say—they say David's going to divorce her."

He lowered his hands, and the round, child's eyes, harmonising perfectly with the chubby, boyish face, were as full of horror and incredulity as his voice had been. I knew, of course, that Dainton had lost his elder son in the

first year of the war and I believe that the younger had been wounded at least twice; this was the first time, however, that he had been flung against the sharp rocks of life, and he was as helplessly and bewilderedly scared and resentful as a child who has fallen among the breakers on a rugged coast.

"You had better tell me all about it," I said.

His stammering, self-interrupted narrative added nothing to the three sentences which he had already spoken. The blow had fallen that day at luncheon. Dainton found himself one of a large party which was for the most part unknown to him. Half-way through the meal he caught the sound of his daughter's name with some comment which would have been grotesque, if it had not been uttered with so much assurance. There followed the silence which drives home to a speaker that he has said something unpardonable and that he alone is unaware what it is. Dainton's neighbours rallied simultaneously and doused him with two conflicting jets of conversation, only to find that he was not listening and that, when they paused, he asked in an amazed whisper whether they had heard what was said.

"I may not have caught it right," he explained hopefully.

But both denied that they had heard the words in question.

When luncheon was over, an unknown woman with a scarlet face came up to him and apologised with tears in her eyes. What he must think. . . . She wouldn't have done such a thing for the world. . . . Really it was partly their hostess's fault for not introducing them properly. Honestly, she had no idea . . .

"I asked her to say it again," Dainton told me dully. "It was the very first I'd heard, the first I'd *suspected*. . . . I can't believe it *now*—not *Sonia*. . . . She—she said it was only a rumour, she couldn't vouch for it, but there was a report that David was going to . . ."

He paused to raise his glass, spilling the wine generously. "I didn't know what to do. I couldn't go about asking every

Tom, Dick and Harry whether *my daughter*— When I got away from the office to-night, I went round to her house to see if I could find out anything from Oakleigh or George— I could talk to them fairly freely. . . . I remember my wife told me, I forget when it was, that Sonia was away and that George had moved in there to look after his uncle; neither of us ever *dreamed* then . . . They were both out, so I thought I'd come and bother you. I knew you were pretty intimate with them. I—quite frankly I want you to tell me if what that woman said was true."

I did not find it easy to face Dainton's troubled, boyish eyes.

"I'm afraid it is," I said. "She's left O'Rane, she *did* go off with another man. I'm sorry to say that your luncheon-party wasn't the only place where it was being discussed, and several people have told me that the petition's actually been filed."

Dainton picked up a pair of nut-crackers and twisted them nervously open and shut.

"This will kill Catherine," he muttered. "We've both of us always been so proud of her, she was always so wonderful, even when she was a little child. . . . Stornaway, is this true? Is there no doubt of any kind? You don't know what she is to us!" he cried fiercely, as though I had been responsible for the shipwreck of their pride.

"There seems to be no doubt at all."

"I wonder if I may have another glass of wine," he said absently. "I'm afraid I've spilt most of this."

We must have sat for another hour in the deserted Coffee-Room, now silent as Dainton yielded inch by reluctant inch to the slow penetration of inevitable truth, now discussing explanations and canvassing expedients for retrieving a lost position. Beyond giving Grayle's name and mentioning that I had been present when an attempt was made to obviate divorce proceedings, I volunteered no details and did my best to give patient hearing to schemes which the rest of us had either rejected already or refused to consider. He would *force* Sonia to return to her husband,

force O'Rane to take her back, *force* Grayle to give her up. . . .

"There's no kind of *force* you can use," I had to tell him. "We've tried argument and entreaty, and that's failed."

"Her mother can make her!"

"No one can make her!"

Dainton looked at me as though I had contrived the catastrophe and were pluming myself on its completeness.

"But do you mean we've got to stand by and see our Sonia in the Divorce Court, to have her examined and cross-examined—our own child, with reporters scribbling it all down and everybody reading about it next day in the papers? It's unthinkable, Stornaway, it's unthinkable!"

"Tell me any way of avoiding it, and you may count on any help I can give you. By all means see her yourself or get Lady Dainton to see her. Of course, assuming that O'Rane has started proceedings, I don't know that you'll stop him. He's behaved with the greatest love and loyalty, and, if I may say so, your daughter exceeded them when she went back with Grayle after we'd tried to persuade her. But get Lady Dainton to see her. It can do no harm, but I advise you not to build too great hopes on it. Your daughter's last words, pretty well, were that she'd thought it all over beforehand and was prepared to face everything. Conceivable she may be frightened when she's taken at her word, but I'm inclined to think it will only make her set her teeth the harder."

Dainton looked at me dazedly, as though his mind had lagged a sentence and a half behind everything that I was saying and he were trying to overtake me. With marked indecision he raised his glass, lowered it, raised it again and gulped down the last mouthful of wine. Then he rose to his feet and beckoned me to do the same.

"There's not a moment to lose," he said gravely. "I'm going round to see Sonia at once. If you'll shew me where the telephone is——"

I led him to one of the boxes by the porter's office and

dawdled in front of the tape-machine while he searched for Grayle's number and awaited his call. There was little news, but numerous prophets were helping the new Prime Minister with a wealth of conflicting suggestions to construct his cabinet. I had not succeeded in finding Grayle's name mentioned more than once when Dainton emerged and led me to a sofa.

"She's not in," he said. "I don't quite know what to do. I *must* tell my wife at the earliest possible moment. . . . My God, if she came up here and had it broken to her as I did to-day. . . . I should like to catch the 11.10 to-night . . . and I could go and see David to-morrow. Poor boy! I'm not blaming him, but he can't understand what he's doing, what this means to us—Sonia! If only I *knew* about it! . . ." He turned to lay his hand timidly on my knee. "She seemed very determined, when you saw her?"

"Immovable," I answered.

"You think she'd disregard her own father and mother? Stornaway, you don't *know* what she is to us!"

His voice gave me the answer, but I saw no way of bringing home to him that he and his wife were less than nothing to her at this moment.

"You can only try," I said. "I've seen her at 'The Sanctuary' with O'Rane and Grayle, I've seen her in Milford Square by herself——"

He looked at his watch and turned to me excitedly.

"Look here, I can't be in two places at once and I *must* get down to my wife. Will you—I've no claim on you; I ask it, because I can't help myself—will you go to Sonia, *insist* on seeing her, tell her of our meeting to-night and beg her—in her mother's name—and mine——"

His faltering sentences lagged and halted until they stopped altogether.

"If you wish me to," I said.

"I can never thank you enough! I pray you'll never be in a similar position, but if you are——"

"Don't build extravagant hopes on it," I warned him again.

When I had seen him into a taxi, I drove to Milford Square with profound and momentarily increasing distaste for my mission. I felt instinctively that it was foredoomed to failure; I knew that, two hours after I had failed, the Daintons would be staring blankly at each other or pacing nervously up and down the room, refusing—despite my repeated warning—to abandon hope until my failure had been confessed. And I knew that I must see Mrs. O'Rane alone—which Grayle would try to prevent—and make an emotional appeal—which I was ill-equipped for doing. . . .

My taxi drew up at the door. I rang and enquired of my old, smooth-faced antagonist whether Mrs. O'Rane was at home. I was told that she was not.

"Then I'll wait for her," I said, squeezing past him into the hall and taking off my coat and gloves. "Is Colonel Grayle in?"

"Not yet, sir; Mr. Bannerman's in the smoking-room."

"I should like to see him," I said, "if he's not engaged."

Guy dragged himself out of an arm-chair with a mixture of surprise and distrust.

"Hullo! what brings you here?" he enquired. "I never expected to see you."

"Well, I never expected to see you," I answered. "I thought you'd been banished."

He looked at me with cautious absence of expression and then applied himself to treading a little mound of cigar-ash into the carpet.

"Grayle ought to be in soon," he voluntered. "He said he wouldn't be late."

"It was Mrs. O'Rane I came to see."

Guy looked at me closely and raised his eyebrows slightly. Then he buried the lower half of his face in a tumbler of whiskey and soda, glanced at me again over the brim, swallowed and set the glass down empty.

"What d'you want with her, if I may ask?" he enquired.

Guy has a dual personality compounded of loyalty to his master and love for humanity at large. The combination

is not an easy one to imagine, but he contrived at once to blend the qualities and yet keep them distinct. I told him frankly and fully of my conversation with Dainton.

"I warned him that he was sending me on a fool's errand," I said. "But how could I refuse? I'd submit to being sent on a dozen fool's errands each day, if I thought I could spare him—and his wife—and O'Rane—and his wife——"

Guy raised his hand to interrupt me.

"Look here, how much do you know?" he asked, as I had been asking every second person that day. "Not the early part; what I mean is, are you up to date?"

"Two or three people have told me that O'Rane's actually filed his petition," I said. "Is that true?"

"I don't know. Is that *all* you know?"

"My dear Guy, the whole of London's discussing the thing, I've heard an approach to the truth and most kinds of variants."

"But is that *all* you know?" he repeated.

"I imagine so," I answered.

Guy shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Then you're not up to date," he said. "*I* got Dainton's enquiry on the telephone and I told him that she wasn't in. It was true—as far as it went. She's gone, Storn-away. I've not the faintest idea what happened, but there was—a big row of some kind—not the first by any means, I may tell you,—and she walked out of the house."

"But where's she gone to?" I asked, as soon as I was sufficiently recovered from my surprise to ask anything.

"I've no idea," he answered.

5

I wanted to ask so many questions that I hardly knew where to begin, but Guy—with the best possible intentions—was not in a position to tell me anything worth hearing. Mrs. O'Rane, at the end of an hour-long altercation behind closed doors, had come into the hall with a pearly-white

face, collected a fur-coat and umbrella and walked into the Square.

"She stopped for a moment on the top step and unfastened her latch-key—she used to carry it tied to her bag with a bit of ribbon;—I found it in my hand the next moment, and she was saying good-bye and telling me quite casually that she wasn't coming back. Grayle—he didn't even trouble to come out of the smoking-room. What it was about I can't say, but they must have had an unholy row." Guy looked at me dubiously, weighing my discretion. "I suppose, now that it's all over, there's no harm in saying that rows were the rule rather than the exception. . . . Right from the earliest days, when she used to come and dine here or he took her out. I don't know how either thought they could possibly live in the same house. Of course, she fascinated him," he conceded with the gusto of a Promenade *habitué,* "but she never cared for him. I'm as certain of that as I am of my own existence. She's a curious woman; it used to make me go hot and cold sometimes to see and hear Grayle with her—he was cruel,—but, the more he bullied her, the more she respected him. If he shewed her the sort of deference a man does shew a woman, he seemed to lose his grip. I don't know how much you saw of them before she came here, but she was playing cat and mouse with Grayle. Or trying to. He soon put a stop to that. He's had a good many ordinary *affaires,* but he was really fond of this woman, and, when he found that O'Rane was openly living with someone else——"

"That's well-established, is it?" I interrupted.

"I believe so. Well, he naturally wanted to protect Mrs. O'Rane. *She* treated it as a joke, until he swore he'd never see her again. (He was always saying it, but this time he meant it.) Then she got frightened. First she rang up,—and he ignored her; she wrote,—and he didn't answer her letters; called,—and he refused to see her. The next thing was complete surrender." Guy Bannerman spread out his hands and shrugged his shoulders. "You *can't* compound a common life of *that* sort of storm and sunshine. Grayle

found that, if he wanted to get his way,—well, he didn't actually take a stick to her, but it was the next best thing."

Guy paused to sigh in perplexity, trying vainly to reconcile his idol's behaviour with his own romantic canons of chivalry.

"Go on," I said.

"Well, he was gradually breaking her spirit, killing all her charm; and then I really think that he began to get tired of her. They were wearing each other out, and you couldn't expect her to be mewed up inside the house, and people were beginning to talk. . . . I've told you pretty well all I know."

I digested Guy's story in silence until I heard the jingle of a hansom cab outside, followed by a word or two in Grayle's voice. A moment later he was standing in the door-way, scowling in surprise at seeing me there.

"Hast thou found me, oh mine enemy?" he sneered. "I seem to remember your giving it as your considered opinion that you never wanted to see me or speak to me again. I'm honoured by your visit, of course, but you can—just—clear—*out!*"

He pushed the door open to its widest extent and stood aside as though nothing would give him greater pleasure than to assist my departure with a kick. In his present mood he would have done it without much further provocation, but I am no more of a physical coward than my neighbour and I was not going to let him threaten me.

"I came to see Mrs. O'Rane," I told him without getting up.

"Well, no doubt Bannerman's informed you that she's not here."

"I want to know where she is. I may mention that I've seen her father to-night. He'd heard nothing till lunch-time to-day, and, though it's no affair of his, I thought he was rather upset. He's gone down to Hampshire to break the news to his wife, and I promised to see if I could arrange a meeting with his daughter."

Grayle walked to the sofa, picked up my coat and tossed it to me.

"I don't know where she is," he said shortly. "And I don't care."

My hat followed the coat through the air and dropped on to my knees.

"Dainton wants to stop the divorce," I said. "That must have a certain academic interest for you, Grayle. He's seeing O'Rane to-morrow morning."

I looked in vain for any sign of pleasure, relief or concern.

"I tell you, I don't know where she is," he repeated. "She left this place to-day—and—she's—not coming—back."

"You mean you turned her out," I suggested.

"Oh, I'm sick of this!" He limped to my chair and caught my wrist in one hand, bending it back until I had to get up to prevent his breaking my arm off at the elbow. "As a matter of courtesy I told you she'd gone, and the best thing you can do is to follow her. You've found time to meddle with my affairs for a good many months, but I'm tired of it now; it's got to end. I give you fair warning, Stornaway, that I am instructing my servants not to admit you, if you come here again; and, by God! if you try to force your way in, I'll thrash you out with a crop. Now—*march!*"

My exit was painless, though I will not pretend that it was dignified. I walked a few yards along the Brompton Road, wondering what to do next. It was futile to speculate where Mrs. O'Rane was gone; she could not return to "The Sanctuary," she could not go home to her parents; after abandoning her husband and being abandoned by her lover within six months, she could hardly—with her pride and temper—ask a friend to take her in. Any grandeur with which she had tried to invest her recklessness and infidelity at our last meeting was sorely draggled. And she was about thirty—a year or two more, a year or two less—in the full bloom and beauty of her life, with some hun-

dreds from her father to pay her hotel bills, debarred by the war even from hiding herself for a few months abroad. I stood still to wonder where she was at that moment, how she was facing the future.

Then I turned down Sloane Street and made for the Underground station. I had meant to go home and, perhaps, to telephone to Dainton, but it could do no good, and I wanted to hold a council of war with the Oakleighs. In Sloane Square I met Beresford hobbling along on a stick and made him turn round and keep me company. In some way I felt that he deserved to be present. Bertrand was in bed when we reached "The Sanctuary," but I found George reading a book with his feet up on a sofa, and, when I told him that my business was urgent, we adjourned upstairs to the scene of more than one early morning session. I told them as shortly as I could of my interviews with Dainton, Bannerman and Grayle and left the facts to sink in. The ensuing silence was broken by Beresford, speaking more to himself than to the room.

"The cad!" he muttered. "Oh, my God! the cad! And you don't know where she is now?"

"No. I've given you all the facts."

After the one outburst Beresford remained quiet, and the other three of us started a rambling debate to decide what we wanted done and what was practicable. Bertrand acted as chairman and put the questions. We agreed that for the sake of O'Rane and the Daintons the proceedings should be stopped, if possible; it was established that Mrs. O'Rane and Grayle were unlikely to meet again, and, if we could get back to the terms discussed a few weeks earlier, it was still conceivable that the scandal might be suppressed.

"But O'Rane doesn't know they've parted," I reminded Bertrand. "Someone must tell him. I'll go down, if necessary, as I had the news at first-hand. Of course, if he refuses and says they had their chance and missed it——"

"He won't refuse," said Bertrand. "You'll go? I believe we can stop it even now. He's not particularly vindictive—he shewed that the other night—and he'd sooner spare his

wife than punish Grayle." He grimaced with disfavour. "Stornaway, I've never liked that man, but I didn't think he was capable of this."

"Nor did she, poor soul!"

We had reached our decision, and, if I had to leave for the country by an early train, I wanted to get home to bed. George and his uncle were chewing the cud of my story, and I saw no end to that. I was putting on my coat, when Beresford begged me to stay a moment longer.

"You're not *leaving* it at this, are you?" he asked, with a white face.

"Have you anything to suggest?" I asked.

"You're going to let Grayle ride off? Merciful Christ! And I thought some of you were Sonia's friends!"

He struggled to his feet and in another moment, bumping past me, was half-way to the door. George sprang from his chair and had one foot planted solidly in the way before Beresford could reach the handle.

"Here, where are you off to?" he demanded.

"Something's got to be done about Grayle," was the reply.

"What do you mean?" I asked, for Beresford had the voice, the eyes and the bearing of homicidal mania.

"I'm going to have a word with him," he answered between clenched teeth. "Let me go!"

There was something pitifully incongruous between the purposeful language and the emaciated, consumptive speaker. Grayle, for all his unsound leg, could pluck him up by the ankles and crush in his head against the wall like the shell of an egg.

"Let's hear some more about it first," I said, taking his arm despite a quiver and jerk of protest. "I know Grayle fairly well, and, if you're going to match yourself against him in physical strength, you might just as well try to knock holes in the side of a battleship with your naked fists."

Beresford wriggled against my grip.

"I can have a go at *spoiling* him first," he cried. "After that, I don't mind what happens."

Their motives were different, but I was vividly reminded

of the Cockney Huish preparing to advance, vitriol jar in hand, against the unerring rifle of Attwater. I looked over Beresford's head and lifted my eyebrows at Bertrand, who raised himself in bed and called him twice by name.

"You mustn't do anything hasty," he urged, wagging his forefinger with great parade of reasonableness. "Any kind of attack on Grayle is bound to recoil on Sonia, and that's the last thing you want. I assure you that twenty-four hours after you'd gone for him——"

Beresford shook free of my arm and limped menacingly up to the bed.

"*You* don't care a curse for her," he cried, "but you pretend to care for O'Rane. You're going to let Grayle break up O'Rane's life, take away Sonia from him, throw her out of doors——"

Bertrand spread out his hands with a gesture of bland expostulation.

"My dear boy, we can't prevent it. It's *done,* and any act of private vengeance will hit David and Sonia hardest of all. Haven't we been scheming and contriving to prevent the divorce for that very reason? We all know that it would dish Grayle's political career to be cited as a co-respondent at the present time; it would keep him out of the Cabinet or compel him to resign. But I can tell you that it would dish the O'Ranes very much more completely. Dear boy, when we're hoping to close down one scandal, for Heaven's sake don't open up another."

If not impressed, Beresford was at least interested and temporarily checked. He stood reflecting with a scowl on his face and his underlip thrust forward.

"Is that—brute going to be taken into the Government?" he asked.

"According to the papers there's every possibility," Bertrand answered. "No one will ever know, but I choose to believe that he tired of Sonia from the moment when his plans were threatened by the possibility of a scandal."

Beresford looked at him wonderingly and then turned to me.

"Do you bear that out?" he asked. "I don't know enough of public life to say if it's true. Do you mean that, if Grayle went into the Divorce Court, he'd be broken?"

The eagerness of his tone frightened us a little, for we thought that we had talked him out of danger. Bertrand assumed great determination of manner.

"Grayle's not going into the Divorce Court, if we can help it," he said.

"Grayle's going to be broken, if I can work it," was the retort.

"But you can't. No one would support you more readily, if it were possible."

Beresford dropped into his former chair without answering and propped his chin on his fists. Bertrand watched him uneasily; George came back from the door and led me away to the window. Tentatively he asked me how far I thought the threat of proceedings could be used to block Grayle's path of office.

"I don't know how far you can blackmail a man," George admitted. "Particularly a man like Grayle. It's only an idea, I've just thought of it. If we could make him sign an undertaking—something that we could use against him and that he couldn't turn and use against us. It all wants the devil of a lot of thinking out. . . . If Raney doesn't divorce Sonia now, when the offence is still fresh, I suppose he weakens his position; he may not be able to get a divorce later, and then our barrier's kicked to matchwood. I'm not a lawyer; perhaps Bertrand. . . ."

We walked to the bed, where Bertrand was sitting with his eyes on us. I cannot say whether my friends have been more unfortunate than the generality, but one has bound himself by a similar undertaking not to play cards, two more not to enter certain cities, and four or five to resign certain positions and to live abroad. As a rule, however, a felony was being compounded, or the offence was one against honour wherein there was no statute of limitations.

"It's mere bluff, and he'll beat you at that game," Bertrand said without hesitation. "What Grayle's done is to

outrage public opinion, and the public has a short memory. You could break him now, but in two, three years' time people would say, 'This is very ancient history, we've heard *her* story, but not his; probably he wasn't so much to blame as she makes out; she couldn't live with one man, so it's conceivable that she couldn't live with another. But, anyway, it's ancient history.' In three years' time your man of the world would think none the worse of him;—and you can't tell how far *she* may have travelled in three years. Time's on his side."

"But this is the opportunity of his political life," George persisted. "In three years' time it may have gone beyond hope of returning."

"But he knows that David wouldn't sacrifice his wife to punish him. Haven't we talked ourselves hoarse to find a way of stopping the proceedings? Grayle's a level-headed fellow——"

"Hardly at this moment," I interrupted.

Bertrand looked at me in some surprise.

"Well, discuss it with David," he said unenthusiastically. "If he agrees, go to Grayle and try your luck. I never like brandishing weapons that I'm not prepared to use. *I* tell you it's an empty threat and that Grayle will see through it. You know, you're all carried away by some idea of poetic justice, you think you've got a pocket retribution packed up and ready for him; you imagine that people are punished for their crimes in this world. I've outgrown that phase."

The superfluous touch of cynicism flicked us all and Beresford most of all.

"*Some*body's going to punish that man," he cried. "I don't know who and I don't know how, but it's going to be done. I'll drop everything else and sacrifice all I've got to it."

Bertrand sighed and lay back on his pillows.

"Grayle's not worth it," he said.

"But Sonia is!" Beresford cried passionately.

CHAPTER SIX

THE UNWRITTEN LAW

"She said, 'Be good with me; I grow
So tired for shame's sake, I shall die
If you say nothing:' . . ."
A. C. SWINBURNE: *The Leper.*

I

FOR a fugitive from justice London is either the best hiding-place in the world, or else the worst; I have never had an opportunity of deciding, and Mrs. O'Rane's experience has not helped me.

She left Milford Square in the first week of December; in the middle of January her husband and friends gleaned their first news of her. So both succeeded and both failed.

She has told me that her first action after leaving Grayle was to enter a tube station and to study a railway map of London. Her knees were trembling violently, and her brain was numbed so that she stared at names without reading them until something inside her head like the ticking of a watch, now silent, now intrusive, as her attention was captured or left free, warned her to concentrate her thoughts; she had to get away, and time was being lost, time was being lost. . . .

The "inner city" was *ex hypothesi* closed to her; Chelsea, Kensington and Hampstead each contained a sprinkling of friends; beyond them she spelled out the names of places on the outer fringe through which she had passed on her way north, west or south from London. Willesden—you met Willesden on your way to Holyhead or the west of Scotland; Wimbledon—that was an old friend, encoun-

tered every time that you went by the London and South Western to Melton; Croydon—surely Croydon lay on the way to Dover? But nobody *lived* there. . . . Certainly no woman in her senses journeyed to Croydon and inexplicably put up at an hotel. What was one to do during the day? Invent excuses to get away from the hotel between meals? But one must not stray towards London. For three hours, morning and afternoon, one could walk between interminable rows of villas. . . .

Yet why confine herself to London, when the whole of England lay before her? She had only to drive to King's Cross, Euston, Waterloo, Paddington. . . . But she stood in a blouse, skirt and fur-coat; and all her other clothes were at "The Sanctuary" or in Milford Square. She could buy others, of course, but her one prayer was to avoid meeting people. They were talking about her, they would stare past her, when they met, or else—worthy souls!—warn her for her good that Colonel Grayle's name was being coupled with hers,—when he had flung her out of the house! An hour before she had her speeches ready; she was nervously anxious, after the long strain of waiting, to defend herself and defy society in the same breath,—but there was now nothing to defend. She had bought her last dress a fortnight ago at Worth's,—and Grayle had accompanied her to the shop. . . .

But the clothes were a trifle—though she would have to start from the beginning, buy a portmanteau, have it sent to —well, to her temporary headquarters, paying for her room in advance,—assuming that the management would take her in—awaiting the brand-new trunk and the succession of parcels and milliners' boxes. There was not very much privacy about such an escape. . . . And, if you *got* your clothes and *got* away, you were compelled since the war to give your true name wherever you went; anyone who chose to enquire of the police anywhere . . . And you could not get even to Ireland without a permit. It was natural enough, but hard on her, when she was so bruised and beaten, when she wanted so desperately to hide. . . .

No weakness or self-pity! Back to the map, though it were but the map of London. All England might lie stretched in a welcoming expanse, but it was lamentably true that one knew very little of England. One had stayed in country houses here, there and everywhere; one had gone to an hotel in Harrogate, an hotel in Brighton, perhaps three more; one had never explored England like a Cook's tourist or a commercial traveller. One's imagination would not venture beyond a familiar ring—Brighton, Harrogate, Oxford or London.

She stared at the map until a furtive young man who had passed and repassed, slily trying to catch sight of her face, asked whether he could be of any assistance. The shock of being addressed by a strange voice and the need of collecting herself to answer it cleared her brain.

"I want to get to—Euston," she said—and was surprised by the ease and assurance of her tone, steady and authoritative.

"You change into the Hampstead Tube at Leicester Square," he told her.

She waited until he had turned his back and then went upstairs to a public telephone and rang up Grayle's house. It was prostitution of her pride to communicate with the house even from a distance, but she had to have clothes. The butler answered the telephone, and, in the same steady, authoritative voice she asked him to send everything to the Grosvenor Hotel. There was no difficulty about engaging a room, if she could say that her luggage was coming later; no difficulty about anything, if she kept her head. . . . And then she could look round at her leisure, though she would have to change her hotel next day, since she had revealed where she was going.

The next thing? Money. She drove to her bank, drew twenty pounds and enquired the balance. For some weeks she could be easy in her mind on the score of money. Of course, if her father heard anything and thought fit to stop paying her allowance . . . The drive from the bank to the hotel was the worst ten minutes of her life. Hitherto she

had only wanted an asylum where she could shelter until she was strong enough to face the world disdainfully; now she knew that she could never face the world and that she must prowl from one hiding-place to another, lingering apprehensively until she was identified and then wearily slinking away into greater seclusion. . . . Of *course* her father would hear, everyone would hear. And it would give such pleasure to her enemies when they saw that they could put her out of countenance! Everyone had enemies; the most popular and beloved girl of her acquaintance had been prosecuted for some fraud over the insurance of jewellery, and a chorus of jubilation had gone up from these smooth-faced, false friends. And, when she herself had broken off her engagement with Jim Loring, the vilest things were said; she heard them years later from other friends who wanted to make mischief. Women were contemptible creatures. And there would be a thunder of exultation at *her* downfall. They hated her because she told them frankly that women bored her; they were jealous because she was admittedly one of the greatest beauties in London; for years men had been falling in love with her and begging her to marry them; she could have had her choice. . . .

And now she had been turned out of her lover's house! And the world would know it any day. Already her husband's solicitors had written to Grayle, asking for his solicitor's name and address. The letter had been on the Buhl cabinet, and she had opened it in his presence. From the very first she had always opened his letters like that; he had enjoyed it; it had seemed to bring them closer. . . . But this time he was furious. That was the first of the big scenes which had ended with her leaving the house. . . . She did not know when the case would be heard, but the story would race round London; and other stories would be reminiscently tacked on to it—her two broken engagements before she married; it would be said that no man could endure her for more than six months. . . . She found herself shaken with quivering, dry sobs.

In the hall of the hotel a man bowed to her, and she

tried not to see him, as though she had no right to be there. And, when the room had been allotted her, she hurried to it and locked herself in; no one could stare at her there, no one could begin to speak and then recollect and break off. She looked at her watch, dreading the descent to the dining-room, though it was not yet four o'clock; and suddenly she remembered that she had promised to dine with Lord Pentyre and go to a play. He was home on short leave, they had met at luncheon two days before, and she had chosen the restaurant and the theatre. . . .

It was a test case. Since leaving "The Sanctuary" she had occasionally dined out with Grayle, occasionally met him by chance at other houses and often dined with him at home; they had also dined separately with their respective friends, trying to reveal no outward change in their lives until it was forced upon them. Soon people would refuse to meet her, for, whatever else the altercation with Grayle had made clear, they were being of a sudden universally discussed. Bobbie Pentyre had said something about bringing his mother, who had come to London for his leave and wanted to see as much of him as possible. If Lady Pentyre refused to come . . . if her absence had to be laboriously explained . . .

The telephone meant questions. She wrote out a telegram and sent it down by the hand of her chambermaid; then she lay down on the bed and tried first to make her mind a blank, but Grayle's voice was echoing in her ears, then to surrender to her headache, but it absorbed only half her attention. If she could explain and cry to someone . . . a man . . . Staring dully at the clock, she told herself that *now* she would have been dressing, *now* telling the butler to get her a taxi; now, when her dinner was brought in on a tray, Lord Pentyre would be waiting in the lounge at Claridge's; another moment, and he would have been hurrying forward to shake her hand, order her a cocktail, offer her a cigarette. . . .

The hotel would be filled with people that she knew and wanted to see—not that she cared about them, but be-

cause there was something friendly about knowing and being known. She loved living in a crowd. In her first season, when she came up from the country and was uncertain of herself, she could have cried with mortification when everyone else was so much at ease and she was left in the cold until she spoke of comparative strangers by their Christian names, like the others, to pretend that she, too, had known them since she was a child. Instead of which . . . She *was* extraordinarily attractive, her father never grudged money, her mother worked indefatigably; and—there was no harm in saying it, when it was all over,—she had been taken at her own valuation, socially boomed. . . . When she was engaged to Jim Loring—she could see it now—what a *mésalliance* the old marchioness must have thought her beloved boy was making! It was all over now, but, when she dined with Bobby Pentyre, she *did* rather like seeing two-thirds of the people bowing to her and knowing that the rest were whispering, "Isn't that Sonia Dainton? Sonia O'Rane, I should say. Who's she with?" In her first season someone would only have said "Pentyre's got a very pretty girl with him."

But it was all over—with that night. And how petty, when you were flung against realities! To-morrow, if Pentyre dined at Claridge's, the idlers would nod to him and say to one another, "Pentyre reminds me. Usen't he to be rather *lié* with Sonia O'Rane? Someone was saying at lunch . . ." And it would all come out! At least, it wouldn't . . . She didn't care a *damn,* if *anyone* knew the *truth,* but, when they whispered and the women pretended not to be listening for fear it was improper—listening all the time till their ears flopped out of their heads . . .!

To-morrow—She started guiltily. To-morrow they would be expecting her at ten for the Belgian Refugee Committee. And she was lunching out with someone—her head ached too much to recollect who it was; she had promised to lunch and dine out for a fortnight, as she always did; luncheon was arranged for one o'clock at the Piccadilly Grill Room (so it must be some *very* young admirer!), be-

cause she had to go on to a charity performance at the Alhambra, where she was appearing in a *tableau* with Lady Sally Farwell and a crowd of other people—something eighteenth-centuryish, but she had never found out precisely what they were supposed to represent. . . . And the day after she was starting a great housing scheme for the refugees in London, begging for unoccupied houses with one hand and superfluous furniture with the other, bringing the two together. *That* was the kind of war-work she liked. . . . Sir Adolphus Erskine had promised her one of his cars, and she was going round to call on house agents in a new green and black hat with broad green ribbons at the back and a silk cloak bordered with Valenciennes lace. . . . Grayle had sat, beating a stick against his leg, while she chose it. . . .

That was all over, too. A bigger woman, she supposed, would have gone on her way unperturbed, refusing to be frowned out of existence and regally contriving to place everyone else in the wrong—"The Second Mrs. Tanqueray" in her rehabilitation. Though that was on the stage, of course; she had never seen it in real life. . . . Anyway, she could not sit on a committee with Violet Loring and know that she was saying to herself, "I can't make out why Jim didn't see through her." Jim never *had* seen through her, he would have cut off his hand to marry her, cut off both hands when she broke the engagement. But Violet Loring would think that God had stepped in just in time to save him—"You're well out of it, my dear! Rather even poor David than you."

It was a long time since she had concentrated her thoughts on David, but it was too late in the evening to fit him into his place. At least it was only half-past nine, but she was too tired to think. It was not much use going to bed, because she obviously could not sleep, but it would be something to turn the lights out. Undressing slowly, she discovered that she had not begun to unpack; all the things that she did not want would be at the top, and all the things that she wanted at the bottom. It really was

not worth it. . . . She climbed into bed, wondering for a moment why the sheets were so warm and discovering that she had not taken off her stockings. As she pulled the pillow into the nape of her neck, a comb pressed hard against her head, and she found that she had not brushed her hair. "I suppose a man's like this, when he goes to bed drunk," she told herself. Then her eyes closed, and she fell asleep.

At two, five and seven she woke suddenly, wondering what the vague menace was that had frightened her. It stabbed her mind; her heart quickened its beat, and she lay panting until gradually she passed into a waking dream. At nine she was roused by the chambermaid, who said that a gentleman had called to know if Mrs. David O'Rane was staying in the hotel. He gave no name of his own, but hers was set out in printed capitals.

"Mrs. David O'Rane," she murmured, taking the paper and trying at once to seem unconcerned and yet to identify the writing of the printed letters. "No, it can't be for me. Who did you say brought it?"

"He didn't give any name, ma'am."

"But what was he like?" she asked, conscious that she was speaking too quickly for perfect composure.

"I didn't see him, ma'am. One of the porters brought it up. I'll enquire, if you like."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Mrs. O'Rane answered. "I was only wondering. . . . Mrs. David O'Rane. . . . It can't be meant for me. . . ."

It was well that she had registered without a Christian name, though she had been compelled to give "The Sanctuary" as her address—she had no other; her unknown visitor had apparently not troubled to carry his investigations so far. It was an escape; it was also the first verbal lie that she had ever told.

Then for the day's engagements. . . . Perhaps nothing would be known as yet; but to-morrow or the next day it *would* be known, she would not be expected at her Committee; at least, they would wait wondering whether to ex-

pect her or not. . . . It was better to telegraph and say that she was slightly indisposed. . . .

The past was closed as she left the telegraph office. She had to dodge back, as she caught sight of Lady Loring and the Dowager walking away from the Cathedral, no doubt going through the Park on foot to kill time before their joint committee meeting. She *must* get far away from all these associations and reminders; and she *must* find something to do. All her life she was so restless, she had tried to do too much, she was always looking for new excitements; motherly souls like Lady Maitland always told her that—and then asked her to sell flags outside the War Office. And with every man who fell in love with her there was a phase in which he implored her tenderly and unselfishly to take better care of herself—and then robbed her of her afternoon rest in order to dine early and go to a play. People were wonderfully selfish at heart, especially those like David and Vincent, who made most parade of their unselfishness and devotion. . . . Even when she stayed away in the country and was supposed to be doing nothing, she was never happy without some diversion; she *could* not sit down and read or wander about a garden, or go for aimless, dreary walks; she had always needed the stimulus of something to shew her off, to polish and sharpen her, something rival and competing, an audience. . . .

It was not going to be easy to fill her endless day, her life of endless days. When war first broke out, she found that her world was come to an end, that the men were taking commissions and the women training themselves to nurse. She, too, had tried to nurse—and had given it up because the physical strain was too great. Then after her marriage she had collected these committees and acted and sung for charity, but there were very few things that she *could* do. And she had not learnt to do anything in the interval. A government office might engage her, if she chose to furnish satisfactory references, on unskilled, mechanical work. She would go unrecommended, without qualification. . . . No. *That* could be dismissed. She was

not going to the Foreign Office, say, to have Gerald Deganway sniggering to his friends about her; or to find herself unexpectedly carrying an armful of papers to Sir Harry Merefield, or Lord John Carstairs, who had been transferred from the Diplomatic. She *knew* people in all these offices. Before the war she had met them every night at dances. . . .

Of course, a man like Sir Adolphus Erskine with his spider's web of commercial interests would find her work, but she was not going to take *him* into her confidence; he had known her in her glory, when London was at her feet. If she had been in the mood to discuss herself or ask for sympathy, she would have gone the day before to Crowley Court and braved her mother. She had not gone, she would never go; if she had brought this kind of thing on herself, she would go through with it single-handed.

As soon as the Lorings were safely out of sight, she walked into Ashley Gardens on her way back to the hotel. Opposite the Cathedral a car, driven by a girl in livery, was awaiting its owner. Mrs. O'Rane suddenly decided to go up and speak to her.

"I wonder if you'll give me some information," she began with a smile. "I want to know where you have to go to get taken on for a job like that."

"Can you drive a car?" the girl asked.

"I've driven a Fiat and an Argyle and a Mercedes."

"Repairs?" the girl asked in a business-like voice.

"I took the Mercedes up to Scotland single-handed once. I don't say I could take an engine down, but I'm equal to the ordinary things."

The girl considered.

"The General—I drive for General Calverly, you know—" Mrs. O'Rane nodded and turned apprehensively to see whether the General was in sight. They had met a week before at dinner with the Duchess of Ross. "He was asking me the other day if I could find anyone for a friend of his, some man in the Admiralty. I suppose you know your way about London? If you like to give

me your address, I'll mention it to the General. Or, of course, you can go to the school where I went, get yourself tested and then choose for yourself when someone applies. It's the 'Emergency Motor Drivers' in Long Acre. Aren't you Mrs. O'Rane?"

"I am. How did you know that?"

"I thought you must be," the girl answered with a laugh. "I've seen your photograph in the papers so much. The General will probably want you to come and drive for him."

Mrs. O'Rane tried to seem pleased by the compliment when she was only thankful for the warning.

"I'd better go to the school, I think," she said. "They may say I'm not good enough, and I don't like disappointing people. Thanks most awfully. Good-bye."

She hurried away as a portly figure in uniform clattered down the steps, screwing an eye-glass in place, while his driver stiffened to attention.

2

On the morning after my council of war with the Oakleighs, I telegraphed to Dainton that I was motoring down and suggested that I should pick him up at Crowley Court and drive him into Melton for an interview with O'Rane. He must have guessed, I should have thought, that my mission overnight had failed, but I could see, when we met, that he and his wife were emptily hoping. Both were waiting at the door when I arrived; both looked past me into the empty car, as I got out.

"You couldn't get her to come?" Dainton enquired anxiously. "Ah!"

He was a flabby, ineffectual little man at the best of times, and the shock had made him pathetically more flabby. God knows! it was not my tragedy, and I cannot boast that I am capable of an unusually brave show under affliction, but I wanted to make Dainton throw out his chest and hold his head up—and do some hard manual work and a few

physical exercises. I wished, for her elevation, too, that his daughter could see the state to which she had reduced him; she was not sufficiently clever or detached to realise how much his limp indulgence had contributed to her pampered, neurotic wilfulness, but the consequences were there for all to mark. Lady Dainton shewed no sign of weakness. She had not slept much, I dare swear, since her husband returned, but she was collected and equal to every demand.

"I expect we shall find lunch waiting," she said, as I came in. "We can only give you cold comfort, I'm afraid. When we turned the house into a hospital, Roger and I only kept two rooms for ourselves, so, if you find my nurses running in to see me every two minutes, don't you know? . . . I'm glad you were able to come, because we're spending your money here and I want you to see that we're spending it properly."

A table had been laid for us in a room which from its "Vanity Fair" cartoons, gun-cases, "Badminton Library" and estate-maps, I judged to be Dainton's study. The servants were hardly out of the room before he turned to me.

"What happened?" he demanded anxiously. "Catherine knows everything."

"I'm afraid it's rather more and perhaps rather worse than either of you know," I warned him. "I called at the house, and she wasn't there. They'd had a quarrel, and she'd—left him. I've no idea where she is, though George Oakleigh was going to make all possible enquiries to-day. You've not seen O'Rane since last night?"

He shook his head, turning his face away abruptly so that I should not see it, and seemed unable to speak.

"We thought it bettter to wait till we'd heard from you," explained Lady Dainton. "She's—left this man, you say? I shall want a moment to consider this."

I only broke a long silence because I observed her husband preparing to speak and knew that he would contribute nothing worth hearing.

"As I see it, Lady Dainton," I said, "there's an element of hope. We can never set things as they were before, but

we may prevent them from growing worse. On the one hand, O'Rane may *now* consent to stop proceedings. I've not seen him since he made up his mind to move, I can't say what decided him, but, *if* we're all agreed that we don't want the scandal of a divorce, you may be able to stop it. On the other hand, I've been thinking this over the whole way down and I'm not sure that a divorce isn't the necessary and the best thing for both of them, however painful it may be at the time. Quite clearly your daughter and O'Rane can never take up their old life; you see, there are no children to keep them together, even in appearance; they're both quite young, and I question whether it's fair on either to condemn them to their present state. O'Rane can't wake up in ten years' time and discover that it would be a good thing for both of them to resume their liberty."

Neither spoke for some time. Then Lady Dainton said—

"It's all come so suddenly, don't you know? that one is quite bewildered and stupid. First a divorce and then an idea of stopping it and now an idea of not stopping it. . . . All of you have known about it so much longer . . . By the way, why did you never tell us, Mr. Stornaway? I'm not reproaching you, of course, but as Sonia's mother——"

"I thought about it a great many times," I answered. "Our lips were really sealed by O'Rane. As long as he hoped to get her back, we wanted to spare you all knowledge of it; we wanted to make it easier for her by keeping down the number of people who *did* know."

"You didn't think that I could help to persuade her?"

Lady Dainton might say that she was not reproaching me, but her voice was the embodiment of reproach directed not only at me or the Oakleighs or O'Rane himself, but at our whole sex for presuming to interfere between mother and daughter. I could see that she was confident of her power to restore peace, if only we had not ignored her until it was too late. My nerves were in tatters, I could feel the blood rushing to my head and in my turn I began to grow impatient with her, not for myself or my sex, but for her daughter. If ever the sins of the fathers were visited on

the children, poor Sonia O'Rane was being punished for the lax indulgence and pretentious ambition of her mother; had she once been checked or chidden, had she been allowed to marry some man in her own walk of life instead of being fed with flattery and encouraged to look for what her mother considered a "good match," I should have been spared many months of worry and my present extremely painful interview.

"With great respect, I don't think anyone could have persuaded her," I said. "She started with a preposterous but sincere belief that her husband was unfaithful to her, their life was fantastically impossible, both had strong wills, O'Rane was culpably trustful and Grayle was a man who had been uniformly successful, as it is called, with women. You had all the ingredients of disaster there, though it's always a big thing for a woman to compound them. Once she'd done it, there was no recalling her. I've seen her twice since, Lady Dainton; no power on earth would have sent her back to her husband, even if she'd wanted to go."

She finished her meal in silence, only shrugging her shoulders gently as if to suggest that, however wrong I might be, there was no profit in discussing the past. Dainton kept asking me what I thought O'Rane would do and what we must insist on his doing; I retaliated each time by asking him whether he wanted a divorce or not; and there was never any answer.

I had warned O'Rane that I was coming, but he stiffened perceptibly when the Daintons came in with me. In a moment, however, he was calm, dispassionate and lifeless as I had always found him since the estrangement began. And then for the third time, with the knowledge that our nerves were raw and quivering, I had to tell him of my visit to Milford Square and my meeting with Bannerman and Grayle. We talked as if we were solicitors attending a consultation with counsel, treating O'Rane. and O'Rane treating himself, as the lay client.

"I saw she wasn't coming back to me," he explained, "so I thought the kindest thing was to let her lead her new

life unembarrassed by ties with me. I *could* have let her bring the petition, I suppose, but I rather draw the line at that. I didn't see, however much I loved her, why I should get up and lie and say I'd been disloyal to her."

The Daintons looked at me, as though they wanted me to be spokesman, and I reminded O'Rane of his offer to stay proceedings, if his wife and Grayle separated.

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled mirthlessly.

"It started as blackmail, I'm afraid. Afterwards I *did* want to spare her, if I could—— I hoped she'd come back to me. When she refused . . ."

"I was telling Lady Dainton," I said, "that, if you don't expect her to come back, you probably ought—in the interests of you both—to let the proceedings take their course. I know you don't like the idea of it,—we none of us do—but you wouldn't like the idea of her being tied in any way for the rest of her life. Of course, this isn't a thing that you can decide offhand, but, when you consider it, there's one factor you musn't leave out, and that is Grayle."

O'Rane raised his head slowly.

"He doesn't come in now."

"To this extent he does," I said. "If he's cited as co-respondent at the present time, he'll have to retire from public life. You and Dainton and I know that quite positively——"

"I don't *much* mind *who* retires from public life," he interrupted with a thin-lipped smile.

"But that man's quite capable of quarrelling with your wife—well, not to put too fine a point on it—to get rid of her, to avoid a scandal, to accept your terms. I believe he'd have accepted them that night. I confess I can't make up my own mind what to do. . . ."

O'Rane's head drooped forward for a moment; then he raised it and faced us.

"I can't decide anything, either," he said. "My brain seems to have gone to pulp."

One glance at him was enough. I got up, and he did the same. The Daintons looked at each other and at me,

refusing to move, as though they could force a decision by staying there. I shook my head and opened the door into the Cloisters.

"But—before we go——" began Lady Dainton, half-rising.

"The difficulty is that we don't know what we want," I pointed out.

Sir Roger became stammeringly urgent.

"We *do* know!" he cried. "We want to avoid a scandal, we want to keep our poor Sonia from—you know, all the talk and the papers——"

"But after that?" I asked.

Lady Dainton slipped her hand through her husband's arm and led him through the door. I said good-bye to O'Rane, but he insisted on accompanying us to my car and, when the Daintons were out of ear-shot, enquired whether the news had been a great blow to them.

"I ask, because I should have thought they *must* have had some suspicion of it," he said. "People here don't *say* anything to me, of course, but I'm sure they know. There's a sort of bed-side manner about them; you notice these things, if you're blind; it's as if you were calling on a fellow in hospital, when he's had his leg off, and you're being awfully bright and not seeing any difference. . . . Is it being discussed in London?"

"I'm afraid it is."

He walked with his face averted.

"What do they say?" he asked, steadily enough.

"That she's living with Grayle and that you're going to divorce her."

O'Rane's pace slackened.

"H'm. The first part's no longer true, the second part isn't true yet. Stornaway, you've been uncommon kind to me; d'you feel disposed to throw good money after bad and help me a bit more? We've been discussing what's the *best* thing to do and how we ought to treat Grayle and that sort of thing, but so far we haven't taken Sonia into account much. I want you to find her for me. Do anything

you like and, when you've found her, discuss with her what *she* wants done. I'll—generally speaking, you may tell her I'll do anything. If I drop the petition now and some time later on she wants to be free again,—I don't like it, but I suppose it can be managed; these things have been done before. . . . As for Grayle——" He shook his head wearily. "I feel our tariff of punishment in this world is so inadequate. You can hang a man who commits a murder, but you can't hang him twice, when he murders two people. He's broken up our two lives pretty much,—and I dare say we weren't the first; if I could make him suffer as much as I'd suffered through him, we still couldn't cry 'quits.' If he loved Sonia—God in Heaven! we all make mistakes! Think how ridiculously *few* people we have to choose from before we marry! We may *think* it's the real thing and afterwards find we were wrong; I was prepared to think that with them, and if she was going to be happier with him . . ." He stopped abruptly and gripped my arm with fingers of steel. "Do you honestly think he behaved like this, because he was afraid of having his prospects injured by the scandal?"

"That's Bertrand's view," I answered. "He's a very fair ruffian, you know. He would always have an intrigue with a woman, if he thought there was anything to be got out of it; it doesn't require a great stretch of imagination to assume the converse."

We were approaching Big Gate, and he pulled gently at my arm to stop me.

"If that's true, we *can't* leave it where it is," he sighed. "Grayle can't have it both ways. If he doesn't resign his seat in a week, I shall go on with the proceedings."

"But if you decide to go on in any event?"

"Well, he's no worse off. He'll be in private life then, with no political career to bother about."

"And if he refuses and you find you can't enforce the threat? I mean, if your wife asks you not to?"

"I shall find some other way of breaking him. This is not a time for thinking about niceties of law."

"He's not the man to surrender easily," I warned O'Rane.

"I don't know that I am," he answered, and the muscles of his cheeks twitched. "Well, my solicitors are in communication with his——"

"But *if* he refuses to be bluffed?" I persisted.

"We'll try some other means," he repeated. "Will you be kind enough to convey my message—you're sure to see him at the House——"

"We're at some pains to avoid each other," I said.

"But you could meet him for my sake—just to give him the message?" O'Rane begged.

I assented without more reluctance than was unavoidable and said good-bye. We drove in silence to Crowley Court, Sir Roger staring with troubled brown eyes out of one window and Lady Dainton, set and unrevealing, out of the other. At the door she offered me tea, but for a hundred reasons I wanted to get away as soon as possible.

"For the present I suppose we can do nothing," she said, as we shook hands. "I rely on you to tell us when you have any news." For the first time she was unable to keep an expression of physical exhaustion out of her eyes. "I don't know what any of you are doing, of course; what steps are being taken to find Sonia."

"I'm making myself personally responsible," I promised her.

Then I drove back to London and arranged with George to dine with me at the Club. After a restless night he had called at eighteen of the likeliest hotels in the hope of arriving at news of Mrs. O'Rane for the comfort of her husband and parents. Someone of the same surname was staying at the Grosvenor, but it was not Sonia. I described my visits to Crowley Court and Melton, and we concerted a plan for tracking her to her hiding-place.

Two years and a quarter in the government service had made George more of a "handy-man" than I have ever met before or since. He knew the right official in every department for hurrying through the most diverse business for the largest number of friends. If news were required of a

prisoner-of-war, if cigars were wanted out of bond for the use of a neutral Legation, if a German governess had to be repatriated, a passport obtained, naturalisation papers taken out, export permits secured, George would triumph in the quickest possible time over the greatest possible obstacles. It was absurd, he told me, to advertise or insert cryptic messages in the "agony" column of the "Times"; absurder still to employ detectives. For what other purpose did Hugh Mannerly and the Alien Control Department exist? He telephoned to the Home Office forthwith, but Mr. Mannerly had praetermitted his control of aliens in the interests of dinner.

"I'll get on to him to-morrow," he promised. "We'll have every hotel and boarding house in London searched for her; and, if she's not in town, we'll go to work in the country. It will take a day or two, but Hugh Mannerly is unfailing and perfectly discreet."

After my tribute to George and his to Mannerly, I am sorry to record that the first three days of the hunt were blank. It was ascertained, indeed, that Mrs. O'Rane had stayed at the Grosvenor for the night, and that her address was fully inscribed in the Visitors' Book. ("Damned fool I was not to call for the book!" George exclaimed. "I felt certain it must be her and then, when they said it wasn't, I felt equally certain that it couldn't be.") Where she had gone from the hotel no one knew.

"She's staying with friends somewhere in town," George decided, "or else she's gone out of London. I'll get Mannerly to work again outside. I've spoken to a friend of mine in the Permit Office, so she can't leave the country, and I've found out from Raney that she banks with Philpott's in Victoria Street. Mannerly's told the manager to watch the account and report all lodgements and drawings; if she deals by post, we may find out whereabouts she is and, if she comes to the bank in person, we can arrange for the manager to keep her there till we arrive."

I confess that, however efficient George might be, I found him a little high-handed.

"I'm the complete bureaucrat," he assented grimly, polishing his pipe on the sleeve of his uniform. "And I may tell you that, when I consider the opportunities for oppression afforded by the public service, I'm amazed at my own moderation. Anyone would start a revolution to-morrow, if he knew the black conspiracy against personal liberty which a few thousand of us are carrying out."

Once again, after being promised the full sinister support of all the conspirators, I feel ungracious in having to record that the utmost efforts of Mr. Hugh Mannerly failed to produce any result. His department, let me say, was admirably organised, and a ridiculously short time passed before I was informed that no one giving the name of Sonia O'Rane or Mrs. David O'Rane was registered in any hotel or licensed lodging-house throughout England, Scotland or Wales. The manager of the Victoria Street branch of Philpott's Bank, with a disregard for the confidential relations between a bank and its customers which would have amazed me in peace-time, stated that Mrs. O'Rane had personally cashed a cheque for twenty pounds three days before, that her balance—unusually large, I imagined, for her—was one hundred and eighty-seven pounds fourteen shillings and five pence, that no lodgements had been made since the beginning of the month, but that he would promptly report all future transactions so long as Mr. Mannerly desired him to do so.

"I telegraphed to Dainton, after I'd been to see Hugh," George told me. "As we haven't struck oil so far, I thought it would be useful to apply a little more pressure. I imagine Sonia must be living now solely on her father's allowance, so I suggested that he should stop it and see what happened when she'd exhausted her present funds. It's funny about Hugh; he's usually so good. . . . A nuisance, too, because time's so important. You see Lloyd-George is getting out his Ministry? About two-thirds of the offices seem to be allocated with some certainty."

"Have they found a place for Grayle yet?" I asked.

"He's mentioned for all sorts of places," was the answer.

I felt that the Government might not want to include Grayle until he had cleared himself. People were still asking vaguely whether it was true about Grayle, but no one could find flesh wherewith to clothe the bones of the scandal. Grayle himself had not crossed my path since our warm parting in Milford Square; indeed, everyone who button-holed me to discuss appointments or ask my view of the rumour admitted by implication that he had not seen Grayle. Someone—I cannot remember who—told me that he had left London on one of the surprise visits to G.H.Q., which with Grayle played the same part as the old "diplomatic chill" of other days. As the government of the country and the conduct of the war were at a standstill, as members of both houses were flocking back to Westminster from all quarters to join in the scramble for office, I found this explanation unconvincing.

I was soon to find it baseless. In fulfilment of my promise, I sent a note by hand to Grayle's house, asking him to meet me on urgent business at a time and place to be arranged by him. My messenger, who had been instructed to enquire whether Grayle was at home, reported that he had received my note with his own hands and had replied that there was no answer.

3

As Grayle would not come to see me, I had to go and see Grayle.

I did not want to call in Milford Square unattended,—for Grayle had said in his haste that he would thrash me out of the house with a crop, and I knew that he would only disappoint me from motives of prudence. Had he been accessible, I should have liked to have George at hand to ring the bell and, if necessary, to send for the police; and, if prudence so far triumphed over natural impulse as to allow Grayle to discuss terms, George would once more be a useful witness to balance Bannerman.

Failing George, I was at a loss to know whom to invite, for Bertrand was too old to be embroiled in such an undertaking. Beresford, of course, was in the secret and I was wondering whether he would really conduce to the harmony of debate, when his card was brought in with a request for five minutes' conversation on private business.

"I came to see if you'd had any news of Sonia," he began, as the door closed. "I've been on the look-out so far as my leg would let me. You see, in the old days, when we were together so much, I knew something of her haunts and habits. I haven't found a trace. At least, not of her."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He pulled forward a deed-box and rested his leg on it, smiling grimly to himself.

"Do you remember the first and only time you honoured me with a call?" he asked. "It was to say that the authorities were watching my articles very closely, one night when Sonia came to see me, and you *naturally* assumed ——"

"Appearances were against you," I said, "and it was criminally foolish, anyway."

"Well, well!" He smiled with sardonic indulgence. "We won't waste time on that. Appearances have been pretty consistently against me before *and* after, until the night when O'Rane tried to strangle me. Has it ever occurred to you that appearances were *fabricated* against me? We know that Grayle let you all think—and Sonia, too, but she'd lost her head . . . I find that the thing goes much further back. I never told you about my exploits when you were in America, did I?" he went on, nursing his injured leg. "The first time they imprisoned me? There isn't much to tell, but it's illuminating. I'd been writing for weeks in the 'Watchman'—all above board and over my own name. You, no doubt, would call it pernicious stuff—or you would have then; people are coming round to my views a bit more now—I just told the truth. . . ."

His eyes suddenly flashed, reviving my sense that I was dealing with a man who might any day be certified insane. "The whole truth and nothing but the truth! The magistrate nearly choked when bits of my articles were read aloud in court. . . . Well, all copy has to be in by Tuesday morning, we go to press on Thursday, and the paper comes out on Friday. I had my usual two sets of proofs delivered on the Wednesday; I corrected one and sent it back, the other I tore in two and threw into the waste-paper basket. The next day——"

"Where did this take place?" I interrupted.

"At 'The Sanctuary.' Didn't I say that? The next day, when our housekeeper opened the office, he found an assortment of the police with the usual warrants to search the place and confiscate anything that took their fancy. By the time they'd taken our ledgers, our subscribers' register, our letter-books, file copies and the whole of that week's issue, there wasn't much for the delivery vans, when they turned up at nine, and literally nothing at all for the editor and me at half-past ten except two nice, kind gentlemen who put us under immediate arrest. Quick work, wasn't it? You'd have thought that not a soul outside that office could have known for certain that I was even writing that week, still less that I'd written anything stronger than the usual articles. I suspected at the time, but I couldn't bring myself to believe that Grayle would go to that length to get me out of the way; I knew it bored him to see Sonia talking to me, but he had a fair slice of her time, and I didn't think then that he was more than flirting with her. Well, that was the first step."

He paused to beg a cigarette.

"Go on," I said, as I threw over my case.

"Well, that broke down, because I did a hunger-strike, and they had to let me out. There was another misfire about the army——"

"I heard about that," I interrupted.

"About the misfire? I wonder if you did—the early part, I mean. Do you know that I attested in the old voluntary

days? Ah, I thought not. I kept that to myself—for fear of seeming patriotic," he added with a sneer. "Well, when the Derby recruiting scheme came on, there was enough hanky-panky to sicken you. I don't need to tell you that I'm not in love with war or the idea of driving people out like sheep to be slaughtered, but, if you have it, let it hit all classes alike. From the very first, anyone who was strong enough to resist could be sure of getting off. The miners said they'd strike, if anyone tried to conscribe *them;* the Civil Service decided for itself that no one could get on without it. Well, I thought this wanted shewing up, so I went along to Great Scotland Yard to collect evidence at first hand. I got it right enough. The first men I saw were a hulking lot with a crowd of papers in their hands to declare that they were indispensable to the satisfactory working of their departments—people like that young sot Maitland;—they'd been forbidden even to attest till that day, but the numbers weren't keeping up, so they were turned on to keep things going. (I believe the police and the Merchant Marine were dragged in, too, just to give the thing a fillip.) The doctors hardly troubled to look at me before I was rejected; which was a pity, because I wanted copy about the medical examination; but rejected I was, fair and square, with a certificate and, I suppose, some record on their books. In time the Military Service Bill was passed, and I found myself called up. Now, it may have been an honest blunder. . . . It's certainly a damned odd coincidence."

As he paused to laugh, I was more than ever struck by his likeness to a grinning skull with a wig on it.

"But the coincidences were only just beginning," he went on. "It was a coincidence that someone should have been nosing round among my papers—I don't know who it was, I hardly ever lock anything, least of all my own front door. But I *thought* one night that things looked unusual. I have my own taste in untidiness. Then someone let out to O'Rane that I was being watched once more. (If I didn't seem grateful that night, it was because you were

devilishly in the way and weren't telling me anything I didn't know before.) Then came another warrant, another search and another arrest. By one of these *curious* coincidences it was all on the day when O'Rane was due back at Melton, the day when, by one last coincidence, Grayle got back from France earlier than he'd been expected." Beresford raised his hand and brought it resoundingly down on the table. "I can prove nothing!" he cried. "I only say that this succession of coincidences—it's queer. And, if I was a nuisance to Grayle in the early days, he found me very useful later on. My God! what would I not do to get level with that man! Thank the Lord! there's no Christian forgiveness about me. I'll leave that to people with more time on their hands. I've a great deal to get through in a very short space and I'd like to do him in once for myself and three times for Sonia. Is O'Rane taking any steps?"

"There are limits to *his* powers of forgiveness," I answered reassuringly. "I'm calling on Grayle to-night to suggest that he should retire from the House."

The same light of fanatical hatred came into Beresford's eyes.

"I'd give something to be there!" he cried.

I looked at him and resumed the train of thought which his entrance had interrupted. I knew that he could control himself, if he tried, but I did not know whether he would try.

"I was thinking of asking you, when you came in," I said. "You're in the secret, and I don't want to admit anyone else. You know what happens! Everyone tells everyone else on condition that it doesn't go any farther. But can you be trusted to behave yourself? I want you as a witness, and you may have to call for help, if Grayle tries to fulfil his promise of thrashing me out of the house. But you're not to speak, you're not to attempt any violence, you're not to bring even an umbrella with you. Frankly, you see, I'm not inviting you for your amusement, but for my convenience."

I could see his teeth grating.

"I expect I shall get my amusement out of it," he answered.

"Of course, we may not be able to get into the house, but we'll go together. But you promise not to open your mouth or raise a finger?"

Beresford pushed away the deed-box and held out his hand.

"I promise," he said.

It was a wet, starless night when we arrived in Milford Square at ten o'clock. I dismissed my taxi, rang the bell and waited. There was no answer, and I rang again. It was inconceivable that, to keep me out of the house, Grayle had disconnected the front door bell or given instructions that it was to be disregarded on principle.

"I'm afraid I've brought you on a fool's errand," I said to Beresford, as I rang a third time.

We looked to right and left for a second bell, an area door or any other promise of admission. Two interested maids from a neighbouring house joined our search-party, and a constable flashed his bull's-eye impartially on us all and asked if we had lost anything.

"I'm trying to get into this house," I said, pointing to Grayle's door, "and I can't make anyone hear."

He pondered for a moment and then led us into the Brompton Road.

"There was a light in the studio, when I came on duty. You may be able to get in that way."

We groped through a narrow passage to a wooden door set in a high brick wall. Over our heads I could see the outline of two windows, securely curtained but with a phosphorescent border. There was neither bell nor knocker to the door, but I battered resonantly on the thick, blistered panels with my umbrella. For perhaps two minutes there was no answering sound, and I banged again. This time I was rewarded by the slam of a door, the noise of feet on a stone passage and the rasp of a heavy key. The door opened, and my eyes, which were grown used by now

to the darkness, recognised the massive outlines of Guy Bannerman.

"Hullo? Who are you? What d'you want?" he demanded sharply.

I slipped the end of my umbrella into the doorway.

"Is Grayle at home, Guy?" I asked. "I'm Raymond Stornaway, if you don't recognise my voice. I have to see him on very important business."

There can be few minor humiliations so disconcerting as to slam a door and find that it will not close.

"You'll only ruin a good umbrella, Guy," I said. "Listen to reason, man. You remember our talk the last time I was here? You know that Grayle's by way of being cited as a co-respondent?"

"Take your umbrella out!" Guy whispered angrily, feeling for it with his foot, but not daring to detach either hand from the door.

"I've come with a proposal from O'Rane," I said.

The energetic foot relaxed its industry.

"Grayle's given orders that you're not to be admitted," he said.

"I know. And you're enough in his confidence to say whether he's likely to be interested by hearing O'Rane's proposal. I sent him a note this morning, but he didn't see fit to acknowledge it. If he's going to take the same line now, tell me at once, and I'll go away. If, on the other hand, he'll let us in and behave himself, we'll come. I may tell you, as I've already told Grayle, that I don't come to see him for any morbid pleasure which I may derive from our meetings!"

Discretion and discipline did battle within Guy's spirit. and at length he asked, "Who's 'us'?"

"I have Beresford with me," I said.

"I can't let *him* in," was the prompt reply.

"Then we'll go home, Beresford," I said. "Good-night, Guy. Open the door a fraction of an inch so that I can get my umbrella out, there's a good fellow."

He did as I asked him, though guardedly. I pulled at the

umbrella, turned my back and started down the passage, followed reluctantly by Beresford. I walked briskly for fear of spoiling the effect, and, before I had gone ten yards, Guy was running heavily after me.

"If you care to leave a message," he began, bringing a massive hand to rest on my shoulder.

"I don't," I interrupted.

"But, look here, Stornaway——!"

I walked on and, omitting certain obvious intermediate stages, found Beresford and myself shortly afterwards ensconced in arm-chairs before the fire in Bannerman's match-boarded, paper-strewn work-room over the garage at the end of Grayle's garden. Our surroundings were serviceable rather than sybaritic. Oil-cloth, a fur hearth-rug and a couple of Japanese mats covered the floor; the walls were concealed, half by stout blue volumes of the Parliamentary Debates, half by a map of Canada, another of British South Africa and a third of the Western Front. A double writing-table stood in the middle of the room with a sloping desk, an oil reading-lamp and three numbered deed-boxes. There was a reek of petrol from a private and probably illegitimate pyramid of leaking tins, which had projected themselves upstairs from the garage.

Guy produced some cigars and left us to take care of ourselves while he reconnoitred the house.

"I've let you in on my own responsibility," he said, as he opened the door leading into the garden. "Whether he'll see you or not I can't tell."

"I think he will see us," I murmured to Beresford, when we were alone.

I for one had satisfied my intellectual cravings for Canadian geography, when we heard steps approaching on the gravel. A moment later Grayle was framed, though he had to stoop for it, in the doorway. He looked at me with a frown which deepened at sight of Beresford.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Good evening, Grayle," I said. "I've come with a message from O'Rane."

"What are you doing here?" he asked Beresford.

The promise was honourably observed, and there was no answer.

"I brought him as a witness in case you shewed any tendency to be violent," I said. "Grayle, O'Rane thinks that, the sooner you give up your seat in the House, the better. For what it's worth, I agree with him."

He was still standing in the doorway with his fingers on the handle. Clearly he expected something more.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"All," I said, as I got up from my chair.

"Then what the hell d'you want to come here for, wasting my time?" he thundered. "You told Bannerman you'd got a proposal to make!"

"O'Rane proposes that you should retire from public life," I explained. "I always think it's better to do a thing voluntarily than under compulsion."

On that he left the doorway and came into the room.

"This is a threat, is it?" he asked, looking down on me with arms akimbo.

"A forecast," I substituted. "I see from the papers that you may be invited to join the Government. You will never join the Government, Grayle, or, if you do, you'll leave it before you have time to find out where your office is. If you retire voluntarily, you may live to an honoured old age; if you force O'Rane to go through with his petition, I'm afraid you'll have a very ugly fall."

Grayle loosened his belt, though with too much deliberate preoccupation to suggest that he was about to use it as an argument in favour of our retirement; then he unbuttoned his tunic, removed a bundle of papers from a woollen khaki waistcoat and transferred them to one of his outside breast-pockets.

"Do you know? your forecast does not strike me as exhaustive," he observed, as he settled his belt in place once more. "As a preliminary, however, does O'Rane propose to go on with the divorce?"

"Frankly, I can't tell you," I said. "He would like to

consult his wife's wishes. I make no bones about telling you, Grayle, that you get very little out of any proposed arrangement. If she wants a divorce, your—fair name, shall we call it?—is smirched, whatever you do; but I fancy, unless you find your parliamentary duties too exacting for your enfeebled health—and that within one week from to-night,—your fair name will be smirched whether she wants a divorce or not. I can't say what's in her mind, of course, but, if you accept defeat at once, there's a fifty per cent. chance that you'll escape a scandal in which, when all's said and done, you don't cut a very gallant figure. By the way, I have to have your answer to-night."

"My answer's 'no.'"

It was given without hesitation and, so far as I could see, without bluff. I have been connected with large commercial enterprises long enough to be a tolerable judge.

"I'll let O'Rane know at once," I said, getting up again and motioning Beresford to do the same. "It will be an unsavoury case, Grayle."

"Which is presumably the reason he's so unwilling to go on with it," Grayle sneered. "But make no mistake who comes out of it worst. *He* hasn't bothered to think. Your —proposal I reject with thanks, but I'll make another. You're quite right in thinking that I would sooner not be mixed up in these proceedings any more; if O'Rane will give me a written undertaking to drop them *here—and—now* and never to revive them, we can let it rest at that."

Beresford had not promised to refrain from laughter, and I excused it as the only possible comment on the offer.

"Come along," I said to him. "We're wasting the nation's time; and the nation won't have the benefit of it much longer."

Grayle shrugged his shoulders and led the way to the door on the lane.

"So be it!" he said. "Yet mine was a fairer bargain than yours. There was at least a *quid pro quo*."

"I'm afraid I don't see it."

"Then I'm afraid your principals haven't instructed you

very thoroughly," he answered impatiently. "From your general tone to me, you evidently think that I've behaved very badly, that it was my fault, that the sympathy of the court will be entirely with O'Rane and his wife. It may be with O'Rane," he added meaningly. "I'll tell you at once that I propose to defend the action and, though it's only guess-work, I shall be very much surprised if O'Rane gets a decree. . . . If he *likes* washing his wife's dirty linen in public, that's his affair, but what seems to have been overlooked is the attitude of Mrs. O'Rane throughout. To begin with, I can call witnesses to prove that O'Rane repeatedly proclaimed that he wouldn't raise a finger to keep his wife, if she preferred to risk her happiness with another man. She used to say *she* wouldn't stay with him, if she was unhappy; I can produce witnesses who'll testify to that, too. Any pretence, therefore, that I burst in on a happily married couple and forced them apart is historically untrue. And this will come out in court. But what matters more from the point of view of Mrs. O'Rane's reputation is the evidence—I think you were with me, Stornaway, when she rang me up one night at the House. What you've overlooked in your haste to condemn me, what O'Rane's overlooked in his haste to save his wife's reputation is the part played by his wife. I'll accept full responsibility for my share of whatever's happened, but I'm afraid you'll find it won't ease your position. Mrs. O'Rane's letters to me, which will, of course, be read in court, prove that it was she and she alone——"

It was not difficult to imagine the end of the sentence. Grayle spoke with the bored indifference of a man who has had unwelcome attentions thrust upon him, who has tolerated them as long as he can, but who at last and at the risk of wounding an importunate mistress . . . I never heard it, though, because Beresford, unpardonably if excusably forgetting his promise of silence and immobility, had twitched my umbrella from my grasp and whirled it backhanded into Grayle's face with a cry of,

"You cad! you cad! you *bloody* cad!"

4

The moment that the blow was struck I felt that lives would be lost before we parted. Beresford had come to the house clamorous for blood, I will admit at once that I had wrapped a taunt round every word that I had spoken, and for weeks Grayle had been in a state only describable as eruptive. I found time, however, with that curious detachment which a brain shews when it is working with twice its usual clarity and speed to reflect what an absurd and incongruous trio we made; Beresford dying of consumption, all skin and bones held together by will-power —lame, shabby, ill-groomed, with two blazing eyes in a parchment-coloured face; Grayle towering over the pair of us, blue-eyed, pink-cheeked—with a thread of blood running from one corner of his mouth,—yellow-haired, like some giant's child in uniform; and, if I could have seen myself, I should have looked on a plump, middle-aged man with, I believe, a benevolent expression, a good many wrinkles on the forehead and round the eyes and a thick crop of prematurely white hair.

Beresford's action was so unexpected and sudden that we—and I include him—were temporarily paralysed. After the brief outburst there followed a silence in which we seemed to be waiting for the end of the world to be proclaimed. Then Grayle put his hand to his face and brought it away wet. I watched him raise his eyebrows at the sight, walk to the door opening on to the garden, turn the key and pocket it. (I suddenly remembered being bullied at Eton.)

"He brought this on himself," he observed quietly to me; and, before I had leisure to guess what he intended or see what he was doing, he had gripped Beresford by the collar, lifted him off his feet and was belabouring him with his stick until the ribs cracked like dry wood in a hot fire. At the end of six swift blows the stick broke in two, and he looked round for another weapon. A round office ruler met our gaze at the same moment, and from opposite sides

we pounced on it simultaneously and simultaneously caught hold of it. I had two hands to his one, however, and with a wrench I contrived to twist it out of his grasp.

"Drop him!" I cried, but Grayle only looked round for means to renew the attack. "I'll break your arm, if you don't."

His grip on Beresford, who was still dangling and writhing in the air with his face purple and his feet rapping out a tattoo on the oil-cloth, never relaxed. I raised the ruler above my head and brought it down on Grayle's forearm with all the strength that I could muster. I had aimed at his wrist, but a plunge by Beresford spoiled my aim. Grayle gave some body-twist, which I was too much preoccupied to see, and an instant later I felt his powerful fingers inside my collar and my head being savagely bumped against Beresford's. Every other time my ear was crushed against his fleshless skull, and the pain was excruciating. I made ineffectual backward sweeps with the ruler, hitting Beresford as often as I hit Grayle; I battered on his fingers and tried to drag them away from his collar, but every effort that I made and every new injury that I inflicted made him the drunker with lust of battle. The side of my head felt bruised to pulp, and, when I put my hand up to protect it, Grayle only laughed like a maniac and changed his hold so that he could avoid the buffer and bang us on our unprotected brows.

Beresford was limp and crowing, I breathless and sweating before it occurred to me to use my feet. Exploring for Grayle's shins with my heel, I made sure of my mark and lashed out and up as hard as I could kick. It is to be presumed that I caught him on his injured knee, for I heard a gasp of pain, we were jerked abruptly backwards, and Grayle slowly subsided, like a wounded bull in the ring, dragging us on top of him. For a moment we lay motionless; then I heard Beresford's struggles for breath beginning again with feverish, rumbling acceleration. He had fallen on the mat in front of the fire, and his face was pressed so close to the bars that the heat must have been

blinding and insupportable. I saw him trying to make a screen of his hands and heard a diabolical laugh from Grayle. The sound gave me new strength, and I tugged at my collar till it burst away from the stud and remained emptily in Grayle's hands while I struggled to my feet.

I had always imagined that, however desperate my plight, I should refrain from some methods of warfare, yet now I struck again and again at the wounded knee, I kicked him in the wind and, if this last had not sent him rolling and gasping on to his side, I believe I might have tried to gouge his eyes out. It was the only time that I had ever had to fight for my life; the instinct to live was stronger and more resourceful than I had imagined.

As Grayle's fingers relaxed, I pulled Beresford away from the fire and set him on his feet with his back to the wall. He was not seriously injured, despite the drubbing from Grayle's stick, and, as soon as he could breathe again, I saw him preparing to meet a fresh attack. My one hope was to escape before Bannerman broke down the locked door and redressed the balance in our numbers, before, too, Grayle had collected enough wind to resume hostilities. Without waiting for my hat and coat, I hurried to the door leading by the stone passage to the lane and flung it open, calling on Beresford to follow me. As I turned on the threshold, he made no sign of moving. I called again, telling him that there was no time to be lost, for Grayle had taken his hands away from the pit of his stomach and was testing his leg before getting up. Beresford also saw that no time was to be lost, but, instead of making for the door, he threw himself on top of his antagonist and dug furiously in the pocket where Grayle had so ostentatiously secreted his bundle of papers.

Though the struggle was resumed with more than all of its old fury, I remember having another interval of lucid detachment. I had intervened before, because Beresford was being murdered, but I had not come there to steal papers which did not belong to me and I could not come to his assistance again.

"Break away!" I roared at them, picking up my ruler again and hitting both impartially.

I might as usefully have expended my energies on beating the floor. Both were too busily engaged to heed me until with a short-arm blow of well-nigh incredible force Grayle lifted his assailant into the air and dropped him again into the fireplace. Then he scrambled on to one knee and faced me.

"Stay where you are, or I'll brain you!" I cried.

He dragged himself forward, and at that I struck. I was more frightened than I have ever been in my life before or since, for, if the phrase have a meaning, there was murder in Grayle's eyes at that moment. The ruler came down on the top of his head with an echoing crack, and his trunk reeled. I hit again, though my first blow was dyeing his hair crimson. This time a hand shot up in defence and grasped the ruler. I pulled until I had dragged him forward on his face, but he only added a second hand and twisted against me, as I had twisted against him three minutes earlier. It was a question of seconds before I was disarmed, and I contrived that, as he possessed himself of the weapon, I could spring to the far side of the writing-table, ready to feint and dodge when he began the attack.

There was a second pause, a second silence. With the same movement we looked towards the fireplace, but Beresford was lying huddled and motionless. Grayle once more put his hand to his head, once more raised his eyebrows when he brought it away covered with blood. Dragging a chair by his side and using its back as a prop, he limped to the second door, pushed it closed and locked it.

"*You* brought this on *your*self," he whispered in a voice that choked with rage.

In equipment, physical power, training, endurance, even in length of reach, Grayle was my superior. His one weak point was the injured knee, and I concentrated my attack on that before he could reduce the distance between us. Picking up the first of the deed-boxes from the table, I raised it above my head and discharged it at his legs. It

struck his feet, I believe; certainly he staggered. Either the second was lighter or I was over-anxious not to throw short again, for this time I hit him in the chest and sent him stumbling and cursing until his back met the door. He stooped as though he would return my fire, but evidently saw the wisdom of not replenishing my ammunition. I picked up the third box, waited until he was back in his old position and then let fly with all the strength that I could put into an overhand swing. The missile was too big and swift to avoid easily at so close a range, but Grayle contrived to make a bend in his body, the box flicked his tunic over one hip and slid along the floor until it bumped into its fellows at the door.

"And *now*," said Grayle. "Bannerman's out of ear-shot, and even the fiendish noise *you*'ve been making won't bring anyone to save you. Before I've done with you, I *think* you'll be sorry you interfered quite so much."

He dragged himself and his chair to the edge of the table and leaned upon it with his fists, gripping the ruler. The next moment I had sprung back, as he threw himself forward and aimed a blow at my head with the full reach and swing of his long body and arm behind it. The point of the ruler glanced off the welt of my boot and dented the oil-cloth. Grayle pulled himself back, rested his hands again on the table and waited, eyeing me reflectively. I was coming cautiously back to my place, when he projected himself suddenly to the right; I jumped in the opposite direction, he stopped, and we gradually came back to our old positions. A moment later he dived to the left, but I had hardly to move, for he was throwing his weight on to a leg which would not bear it. The next plunge was to the right, and this time he made a half-circle of the table until each of us was occupying the other's stance. With these tactics I could keep him at bay for as long as I liked; and I have no doubt that he realised it. While he panted and looked round him, I turned my head for an instant to see whether he had left the key in the door. The one table-lamp, however, threw a yellow circle of quavering

light over the middle of the room and left the extremities in shadow. Whether Grayle divined my thoughts, whether he even noticed or understood my action, I cannot say, but the next moment I received a violent blow on the thighs and was hard put to it to keep my balance, as the table, furiously impelled by him, careered madly towards the door, pinning my legs and holding me, as though I were buried to the waist, to await his attack.

He gave himself a moment to draw breath and enjoy his triumph. The murderous blow which had just missed me never left his intentions in doubt, but in that moment he gave me time to use the last and only weapon left to me. Snatching the big lamp, which flared afresh at my grasp, I raised it aloft and brought it with a crash and tinkle on to his head. For some time I could not understand what had happened, for the room seemed in darkness and yet brighter than before. By the dancing light of the fire I saw that Grayle had disappeared; and the table yielded when I pushed against it. Then a blaze of yellow sprang up in front of me, and I caught sight of him lying on his back with a flood of burning oil spreading over his clothes, lapping the disorder of books and papers which we had tumbled on to the floor and licking the border of the Japanese mats. How much I had injured him with the lamp I could not see; he was clasping his head with one hand and still gripping the ruler with the other.

"Grayle, pull yourself together, man!" I cried, as though by raising my voice I could penetrate his unconsciousness.

In a moment the flames would be pouring over his neck and face; in five minutes, if the petrol cans were reached, the whole lath-and-plaster shanty would be a roaring and crackling furnace. I had to extricate Beresford and Grayle or rouse them to extricate themselves—and I discovered that my body was trembling from the excitement of the duel and that my head was aching savagely. I had hardly found time to think of my injuries until then; to think of anything, indeed, but the next thrust or parry; I had no idea how long the engagement had lasted—and was aston-

ished to find that less than twelve minutes had passed since Grayle first entered the room.

"Pull yourself together!" I cried again, looking for my overcoat to wrap round him and smother the flames. In the unevenly distributed light I could not see it. The oil was sinking into the closely woven tunic instead of flaring itself out on the surface, and above the pungent smell of hot petroleum rose the more pungent smell of singeing cloth. I caught him by the arm and tried to drag him towards the door, but at my touch the body subconsciously grew rigid. I pulled again, and this time he opened his eyes, frowned uncomprehendingly at me and then stared at his blazing clothes with the stupid wonder of a drunken man trying to remember how he came to his present plight.

"Water!" I roared. "Where shall I find water?"

He looked up at me and the expression of wonder gave place to dawning recollection. In another moment his face was transformed. I was still holding one arm, and he allowed himself to be pulled to a sitting posture. Then leaving the flames to shoot vertically on to his neck and face, he swung the ruler for a last blow on the side of my head. I remember that I saw it coming; one's moods change so quickly that I was aghast to find Grayle still intent on murder when I had forgotten all that nonsense and only wanted to help him. It was so ungrateful. . . . And it was so incredible! I did not even let go his arm or relax my efforts. . . .

The ruler struck where my head was already soft and bruised from its late banging against Beresford's. I felt my knees slowly bending, my body gently collapsing. Five and thirty years before a party of second-year men had decided that no one's education was complete until he had once at least had experience of intoxication. I was plied with a very great deal of liquor, very scientifically mixed; and I remember watching for the danger-signals of oncoming inebriation. Throughout the evening I could think rationally and speak clearly; I was neither excited nor

noisy, neither elated nor depressed. I even played a game of whist, I believe, and won a few shillings from my host. The parting brandy and soda, however, hit me like a battering-ram; I subsided on the ground with every muscle limp and, to my shame, crawled downstairs and across the court on hands and knees. When Grayle's ruler brought me down, the same partial paralysis of brain and body must have taken place. I remember lying on my back with my knees in the air, I remember turning on one side and raising myself on my hands; I remember crawling with vast preoccupation to the door, feeling for the key, turning it and, as I hope to be saved, noticing my skill in going down the short flight of steps on all fours without pitching forward on to my head in the passage.

Outside in the lane I paused to take breath and test my strength. By leaning against the wall I could draw myself upright and follow a stumbling course into the Brompton Road. A girl walking by on a soldier's arm pointed at me and tittered; an elderly woman paused to exclaim "Disgusting!" Otherwise no one took any interest in the absorbing story which I could have told him—the fight, the fire. . . . I turned round, all but over-balancing, to see whether the wooden work-room was yet burned down; to my amazement there was no sign of a single flame. Was that because you were not allowed to shew lights owing to the war? There *was* a war; someone had told me, or I had dreamed it—or else I was astonishingly drunk. . . . Was I really trying to crawl home from Mark Goldsworthy's rooms in King's? If so, I must have been drunk for a very long time, for I had been dreaming all sorts of things—dreaming that I had gone down from Cambridge, that I had done this and that, that I was an elderly man. . . . It had been so vivid, this life-story which I had dreamed in a few seconds, that I could see again the bluest water in the world, which I knew to be the Caribbean Sea, though no one could possibly have told me; and the approach to Colon (what other name *could* it have?) . . .

Then I felt overpoweringly sick, but what else was to

be expected when Mark Goldsworthy had laid himself out to make me drunk? It was curious that I should have been dining with him that night, because I knew that he had been killed years later at Omdurman; or would be. Did he know? It was an astounding piece of second-sight, if I knew the name of the battle before it took place. . . . And how dreadful for poor Mark, who had been at my tutor's! He was going to be killed accidentally, shot in the back by one of his own men who had been wounded. I must never tell him of course. . . . And how absurd it would all seem when I awoke, but at the moment it was so real that I could not help believing it. . . . Could I or could I not get on to my feet before I came to the gate? It would look so bad if I were found bestially drunk before I had been a week at Cambridge. Perhaps, if I hailed a taxi and got inside and curled myself up on the floor, we could drive out of college unseen. It was worth trying. . . .

"Take me to the House of Commons, please," I said.

The man stared at me and laughed insolently. I was so tired that I could hardly resent his manner.

"I'll pay you now, if that's what you mean," I said; and, feeling in my pocket, I took out two half-crowns and closed the discussion by entering the cab. He shrugged his shoulders, laughed again and pulled down the flag of his meter; it was the last movement of which I was conscious until he opened the door and jerked out over his shoulder,

"Here's the House of Commons."

We were by the entrance to the yard. I got out and asked him how much the fare was.

"You've paid me once," he answered with a mixture of sympathy, cynical amusement and sluggish concern. "You've been knocking about a bit, you have."

I turned away and walked unsteadily along Millbank. I suppose my brain was about three parts clear by now; I no longer fancied myself to be leaving an undergraduate debauch of thirty-five years before. Somewhere and some-

how that night I had met with severe physical injuries; Grayle was involved in it—and Beresford—and a strong smell of singeing, but my head was aching too much to let me think consecutively. I wanted to lie down and close my eyes, I would have lain down on the pavement but for the rain (and I had lost hat, collar and coat at some point in this nightmare evening) . . . but for the rain and the risk of being thought drunk. Anyone but a fool would have turned the head of the taxi and driven home; I knew the hotel—though I could not give it a name, and the number of my room; but I could only think of one thing at a time and I longed before everything else to lie down on one of those long sofas in "The Sanctuary" . . . which was so near, too.

Some time later I remember standing with my watch in my hand, trying to strike a match against a wet lamp-post.

Later still George Oakleigh was bending over me and trying to carry me from the door-step into the house. He was in pyjamas, an overcoat and slippers; I cracked some feeble joke about his hair, which was unwontedly disordered; then I saw that I was speaking in atrocious taste, because poor George had been in bed and asleep, and I had unfeelingly disturbed him. I apologised, and he said that it was of no consequence, but I had to apologise again and again, because I could not let him be so magnanimous and, moreover, I was not at all sure that he was accepting the apology. . . . He told me that I was ill and must not excite myself. To shew him that I was not ill, I struggled to my feet and walked into the house.

"No bones broken," he muttered. "Lie down, while I get you some brandy. Is Matthews still your doctor?"

"I don't want a doctor, George," I said. "I shall be all right when I've rested a bit."

He gave me nearly half a tumbler of neat brandy. As I drank it, I experienced the most curious sensation of my life; as though a thick cloth had been tied round my brain, I now felt it being gently withdrawn. I saw the room

steadily and could tell George not to look so anxious; I remembered the forgotten chapters of the night, even to the last stumble when I fell on the door-step and beat on the panels with my fists until I became unconscious. Piece by piece my memory reconstructed the changing scene; I wondered what had happened to Grayle and Beresford, whether the fire had been put out, what people were thinking. . . .

I was too warm and drowsy to wonder long, but I remember saying very distinctly and, as I thought, impressively,

"Don't get a doctor to me, George; and don't let anyone know I'm here."

Then I dropped asleep.

5

George came into the library next morning on his way to the Admiralty. I was awake, because after an hour or two of sleep the physical exhaustion which made it possible gave place to physical discomfort which effectually banished it. My head had a collection of dull, throbbing pains which played for a while, each by itself on its appointed spot, and then joined hands and danced in a ring with an initial kick-off under my swollen right ear; over the forehead they went and under the back of the eyes, scampering to the nape of the neck, drawing breath and toe-ing and heeling it to the starting place once more. I had a basin of water by my sofa and relays of handkerchiefs which I dipped and spread over my temples, but by three o'clock my arms had stiffened until I could not bear to move them, and I spent the remainder of the night turning from side to back and from back to side, trying to find some surface of my body which did not feel as if the bones were running through the flesh.

"I told Bertrand you were here," George said, "and the housekeeper, of course. But *she* won't say anything. How you got yourself into that condition——"

He broke off and smiled at my cuts and bruises. Later

in the day, when I got a chance of looking at myself in a mirror, I could forgive his smile.

"It's a long story, George," I said. "Leave it till my head feels a bit clearer. And, once more, don't tell anyone I'm here. At the present time I don't quite know what my civic status is, whether I'm a fugitive from justice or what. Have you seen the papers? Is there anything that you can fit me into?"

"I only had time to read the war news," he answered. "Look here, I've given orders for a bed to be made up in Raney's room, and we'll shift you, as soon as you feel like moving. Is there anything else you'd care for?"

"The one thing I want is the papers," I said.

They were brought me ten minutes later by Bertrand, who strolled into the library, raised his eye-brows and withdrew his cigar long enough to give a short whistle of surprise.

"You're a pretty sight," he chuckled. "George said you wanted these. I suppose you've been fighting the police and want to see if they're advertising a description of you."

I hunted through the main news sheets, losing myself in columns of official *communiqués* and unofficial cabinet-making, before I was rewarded with a four-line paragraph:—

"Accident to Well-known M.P.," I read, and underneath the heading,

"A fire broke out last evening in the house of Lieutenant-Colonel Vincent Grayle, M.P., in Milford Square. It is not known how the conflagration originated and, at the time of going to press, it is not possible to gauge the amount of damage done. We regret to say that Colonel Grayle has sustained severe injuries, which might easily have proved fatal. His condition is critical, and it is feared that there may have been actual loss of life."

I put my thumb against the paragraph, handed it to Bertrand and resumed my search. The "Times" and "Morning Post" contained no reference to the fire, but the late London edition of the "Daily Gazette" gave me plenti-

ful reading matter and rich food for reflection. There was a title, sub-title, headings to the paragraphs and a column and three-quarters of close, descriptive print. It opened promisingly with "Tragedy in M.P.'s House" and progressed through "Mystery Fire in Milford Square" to an account which must have been supplied two-thirds by Bannerman and the rest by the constable who had directed me to the studio in the lane. Grayle's physical state or the delicacy of his position had kept him from contributing anything.

The narrative, so far as I remember it, ran on these lines. Mr. Guy Bannerman, who acted as secretary to Colonel Grayle, had been reading in the smoking-room and went upstairs at about eleven o'clock. His bedroom looked on to a strip of garden, and in making the window secure he had observed that the curtains in the wooden loft over the garage were on fire. After telephoning to the fire brigade, he had seized a jug of water, hurried into the garden and tried to force his way into the loft. The door was locked on the inside, however, and he had to run back and round to a second door opening on to a lane at right angles to the Brompton Road. The room, when at last he got into it, was a sea of fire. Some years earlier it had been roughly fitted up as a work-room and was filled with books, loose papers and maps. There was nothing to shew how the fire had started nor how long it had been going on, but the papers on the floor, the table-cloth and curtains, several straw mats and a fur hearth-rug were blazing. However it had started, its destructive course had been materially assisted by the oil from a big lamp which had been overturned and broken. By the door the flames were fortunately less fierce than at the far end of the room, or Bannerman would have been unable to enter. He emptied his jug in front of him, ran down and refilled it from the garage, emptied, filled and emptied it again until the fire had been driven back a few yards. It was now possible for the first time to see through the glare of the flames, and he was horrified to catch sight of Grayle's body lying mo-

tionless half under the table. Dragging him to the door, he was about to carry him downstairs when he observed a second body on the far side of the fire-place. Then he remembered that two men had called to see Colonel Grayle on business half an hour before; he had assumed that they must have left before the fire broke out, as it was inconceivable that three men should have been unable to conquer the flames at the outset.

After carrying Grayle into the garage, Bannerman returned for the second victim, whom he recognised as a young man named Beresford. Of the third there was no sign in the front half of the room, and he had to go for more water. The wooden walls had now caught fire, the book-cases and chairs were smouldering and the oilcloth had blistered and cracked and was smoking ominously. A very few minutes' work were to shew him that one man armed with one bedroom jug could not even keep the flames from spreading. He ran backwards and forwards drenching the floor with water, but never clearing a path sufficient to allow of his advancing more than a third of the way into the room. When the fire-engines arrived, the flames had eaten through the walls and were licking the wooden gables of the roof; they had licked to so great effect that the first jet of water brought down a cascade of tiles and charred rafters.

While the hoses played, Bannerman looked to the men whom he had succeeded in carrying out. Grayle was alive and breathing faintly, though his clothes fell away in handfuls of black ash at the first touch, and his face and head were shockingly burnt and disfigured. Beresford gave no sign of life. His hair was signed and blackened where he had fallen on his face against the bars of the grate; his clothes were as much charred as Grayle's, but his body was almost unmarked, save for a bruise over the heart, no doubt from contact with the point of the fender. Death was probably due to asphyxiation; this was the unofficial opinion of the doctor, pending the inquest. Partial and temporary asphyxiation, indeed, was the only explanation

why the three men had not either put out the flames or escaped from the burning room.

There remained the second visitor, and, as soon as the fire had been put out, Bannerman returned to the loft. By the light of a stable lantern, it was possible to make a cautious search. Three-quarters of the roof had disappeared, burnt away or fallen in heaps of broken tiles and blackened timber on the floor or in the garden; the walls on two sides, the floor at one end had disappeared equally. On what remained lay a pile of charred table legs and chair backs, broken glass and blistered deed-boxes, scorched books and odd, unidentified metal fastenings and joints, the whole dripping and lapped with sinister black water. Bannerman explored every inch of the wreckage and returned to the garage empty-handed. At the end, where the ceiling had fallen in, a smaller pile of wreckage reared itself fantastically on a platform of petrol cans. A revolving book-case and a filing cabinet, charred but intact, were half buried under broken tiles and blackened volumes of Parliamentary Debates; a stout table leg and a small safe lay further away; and there was the reeking half of a burnt fur-coat.

My interest in the "Daily Gazette" narrative quickened at this point. Mr. Bannerman had admitted Beresford and another (whose name was not given). They had tried the front door—unsuccessfully, because all the servants were out for the night. A constable had suggested their going round to the door in the lane; they had entered; there was no hint that one had left before the other. No doubt in a few hours negative proof would be forthcoming, but, until that appeared, or until a further examination could be made, it was possible that the second visitor had been a second victim.

"I'm afraid we've seen the last of young Beresford," I said to Bertrand.

"What's happened to him?" he asked.

"You haven't read this yet?" I said. "Well, wait till George comes back at lunch-time, and I'll tell you the

whole story. I rather fancy that a good many people have seen the last of me. I say, Bertrand, have you ever been present at a cremation?"

He looked at me sorrowfully.

"I should have thought you'd had enough trouble for one night," he said.

"I have, I can assure you. But my career of crime is in its infancy—I'll explain all this at lunch;—I want to know what sort of fire it takes to consume a human body so that there's no trace of flesh, blood, hair, bone, clothing ——"

"God knows!" he interrupted. "You'd better ring up Brookwood."

"I don't think I'm likely ever to ring up anyone again," I said—rather rashly.

Some while before his usual hour George hurried in with a scared expression and wondering, wide-open eyes. He was carrying the mid-day editions of two or three evening papers, and I saw that I should not have to explain much after all. The only point of interest to me was that Colonel Grayle was not yet in a position to give any account of what had happened.

"And, until he does," I told Bertrand and George, "I propose to keep quiet, too. You see, there's unfortunately no doubt that he and I each tried to kill the other and between us we've succeeded in killing Beresford, though I can't say for certain if it was asphyxiation or the blow on the heart. I'm responsible for that fire. When I see what story Grayle puts up, I shall be better able to decide."

It was not going to be an easy explanation to frame, and the papers were already beginning to wonder how two, and perhaps three, grown men could be imprisoned in a room with two doors, one of them unlocked. If Bannerman could get in some time later, they could have got out some time earlier. I was only wondering why Bannerman had suppressed my name; did Grayle think that he had *two* lives on his conscience?

The evening papers gave a better account of him, though

he was still too weak to satisfy the curiosity of the reporters. They also reminded their readers of his political career and the possibility of his being included in the new government.

"Have you thought out your own position?" Bertrand asked me uneasily, throwing aside his paper.

"I don't know that I have," I answered. "I'd sooner leave Grayle to explain."

"H'm. You came here, stayed here—as much knocked about as you please, raving, unconscious. But, when everyone in London's asking how the fire broke out, no one in the house can find a word to say."

"If Grayle's unconscious, I'm unconscious," I answered. "He can invent the explanation of the fire, and I'll stand by what he says."

Bertrand sat heavily on the foot of my bed with an expression of obvious dissatisfaction.

"Every hour you stay here——"

"I don't pretend that it's ideal," I interrupted. "But I shall wait for Grayle."

I was not allowed to wait for Grayle. And, if neither Bertrand nor I were satisfied with my silence, we had no reason to be more satisfied when I broke it. Yet I hardly see how I could help myself and I am sure that on balance I do not regret my action. The morning papers next day added little to the established facts and wide-ranging guesswork of the evening before, though, as a humane man, I was glad to see that Colonel Grayle's progress was as satisfactory as could be expected. There was a brief report of the inquest on Beresford—death by misadventure, with asphyxiation as the immediate cause, unsatisfied wonder on the Coroner's part that such a fire could have taken place, coupled with regret that Colonel Grayle was not well enough to give evidence. Of greater interest to me was an obviously inspired hint that a new department was to be formed for the control of recruiting and that Grayle was likely to be made its head. If the announcement lacked novelty, its setting did not; for the first time Grayle's own

paper—he subsidised it, if he did not in fact own the controlling majority of the shares—accepted responsibility for the forecast.

I read the announcement about eleven in the morning. I thought over it for perhaps half an hour. Then an idea came to me, which I was powerless to resist. Without considering its effect on him or on myself, without thinking of anything but that I meant to do this, had to do this, I crawled out of bed and made my way painfully downstairs to the library. I was astonishingly weak in body and I have good reason now to think that I was a little light-headed at the time, but I am not looking for excuses. When I had made sure that I had the library to myself, I dragged two very stiff legs to the writing-table at the far end, sat down and asked for Grayle's number on the telephone. It was repeated to me, and I realised for the first time that I had not yet decided what to say. And, before I could collect my thoughts, a woman's voice was exclaiming rather impatiently,

"Hullo! Yes! Hullo!"

"I want to speak to Colonel Grayle," I said.

"I'm sorry to say Colonel Grayle is ill."

"It's essential that I should speak to him. Will you please have me put through to his room?"

There was a perceptible pause, and I chose to fancy that my voice had sounded impressive.

"Er, who shall I say it is?" she asked.

"It will be enough, if you say that it's very urgent."

"I don't know that he's well enough to speak. Are you sure you can't give me a message?"

"If he's well enough to take a message from you, he's well enough to listen to it from me. Please be as quick as you can."

The pause this time was longer, there were mysterious metallic clicks and buzzes; then a man's voice said,

"Hullo?"

"Is that Grayle?" I asked.

"Yes. Who's speaking?"

As he had not recognised my voice, I could leave recognition or avowal to come later.

"It's about this announcement, Grayle," I went on.

"Who is *speaking?"* he asked again with growing irritation.

"Your appointment, I mean. You know what will happen, if you take it; you can't say you haven't been warned. I suggest that, before it's too late——"

Faintly, as though the sound were coming through cotton wool, I heard a muffled cry. I waited, but there was no other sound.

"Grayle?" I began again.

But there was still no sound.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DOOR RE-OPENED

". . . Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha.

And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.

But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.

Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel, may I not wash in them, and be clean . . .?"

II KINGS 5:9-12.

I

WHEN a man has crossed the water-shed of forty, his power of recuperation is sorrily reduced. Perhaps he succumbs less easily to illness or injury, the bruises may take longer to shew themselves, but they also take far longer to disappear.

I found this literally and metaphorically true during the weeks when I lay at "The Sanctuary." After my one painful descent to the telephone, I returned to bed and stayed there for a month. One part of my body after another swelled and changed colour; I was pitifully weak, and for the first time in my life my nerves seemed to have gone limp. The memory of my fight with Grayle haunted me, I could not concentrate my mind on anything and I lacked the native buoyancy to want to get well. Bertrand and George were obviously anxious, but even to oblige them I could not put forth strength which was not in me; the weeks rolled by, and I remained a listless and, I am afraid, an exacting and irritable invalid.

As my name had not been published, as I could in fact plead serious ill-health at the time of the inquest on Beresford, I saw no purpose in thrusting myself on the public until I knew what explanation Grayle proposed to give. Curious enquirers were simply informed that I had met with an accident. In the early days we used to watch the bulletins of Grayle's health and the formation of the new government in parallel columns; and the second made more rapid progress than the first. The chief offices were allotted, one after another, and the minor positions down to the last Junior Lordship of the Treasury; at the beginning it was occasionally stated that "at one time Colonel Grayle's name was mentioned in connection with" this or that or the other appointment; gradually the references to him became rarer until his own paper wrote his political epitaph and announced with conventional regret that, while the Prime Minister was believed to have been hoping to make use of his services, his present condition of health put the acceptance of any office out of the question.

Bertrand smiled grimly, as he shewed me the paragraph, but I was impatiently waiting until Grayle's condition of health enabled him to give me a lead. It came at last through the medium of Bertrand on a night when he had been dining at the House and had seen Grayle for the first time since the fire. I am a tolerably humane man and, though I had struck upon provocation and in defence of my own life, I regretted the state to which I had reduced my opponent. He now walked with two crutches and a sling for his foot in place of the one stick; his head was generously bandaged, and, though a curious faint down was beginning to appear on the exposed portions of his scalp, he no longer wore a moustache, and his eyebrows were singed out of existence.

A circle of his friends was bombarding him with questions and comments from all sides at once—"You had a near shave," "Were you badly hurt?" And then the inevitable enquiry—"How did it start?"

Grayle began a roaming description of the garage and

loft, its tinder-dry wood-work, its equipment of inflammable papers and the like.

"There was a large quantity of petrol there, too," he explained confidentially, "but I don't want this talked about. I had no business to have it there; it was too near the house; the place—as we've amply shewn—was in no sense fire-proof. I should have the County Council or some other damned interfering body on my back, if it came out; I'm not claiming from the insurance company, as it is, for fear of too many questions. They let me down lightly at the inquest, because there was no one who could give evidence. So this is a secret session," he ended with a laugh, as he began to hoist himself away towards a chair.

One or two of his companions followed and relieved him of his crutches, as he sat down.

"But how did it start?" he was asked again.

"The lamp was overturned," Grayle answered promptly. "You see, I got a message that this poor fellow Beresford —he was the deluded fanatic who was always getting locked up for seditious pamphlets, you know—that he wanted to see me on urgent business, so I went off, expecting to find that the fellow was in trouble again—I knew him slightly, you see; we'd met at people's houses—when I got there, we sat and talked a bit. Well, he was lame—like me. . . ."

He paused and pulled at the bandage on his head.

"Where had I got to?" he asked a moment later.

"You sat and talked," Bertrand put in from behind.

Grayle turned round quickly and caught sight of him for the first time.

"You're the very man I've been wanting to see!" he exclaimed; and then to the others, "Excuse me a minute."

Bertrand pulled up a chair, as they withdrew.

"You must be grateful to me for coming when I did," he began. "The story didn't seem to be going with much of a swing."

"You can leave my explanation to take care of itself," Grayle answered shortly.

"I felt I could make it a bit fuller," Bertrand suggested.

Grayle looked at him enquiringly.

"I see. Well, you're at liberty to tell your tale, and I'll tell mine. Or we can both leave it where it is. I admit that some people aren't quite satisfied at present, but I manage to get rid of them,—as you've seen. If you want me even to drop a hint that there was an attempt at——?"

His lips formed the word, but he did not utter it; and the unexpected silence was surprisingly sinister.

"It's no business of mine what lies you tell," Bertrand answered. "Is that all you wanted to say? If so, I'll move along."

In the week before Christmas O'Rane returned from Melton to find me immovably billeted upon him. After the first greetings he sat silent and reflective. I could see that he wanted to talk and did not know how to begin. The room was his wife's, and there were still marks by the lock, where he had burst it from the wood-work. God knows what his thoughts must have been! As I looked at his slight figure, lazily reposing in a long chair, and at his self-possessed, unrevealing face, I found it hard to picture the scene when he broke in the door. And for the thousandth time since that day of tragedy I asked myself what had been left him in life and longed for him to ask at least for sympathy, if he knew that I could give him no more help.

When he spoke, it was to make some comment on the war. The month-old rumour that the cabinet had broken on the question of peace negotiations was still flourishing. Rather than face another winter in the trenches the German Government was alleged to have made an offer to evacuate Belgium and northern France with the alternative of a threat, in the event of the war's continuing, that every neutral and allied ship sailing under whatsoever flag would be sunk at sight without warning. A school that was faint-hearted in asserting itself, even if it were not faint-hearted in the prosecution of the war, whispered that we must not miss our market and—in Bertrand's phrase—refuse terms now that we should have to accept gratefully

and after the loss of another half million men in six months' time. The rival school of stalwarts proclaimed with great show of reason that Germany would talk of peace only at her own convenience—or necessity—and that her needs were our opportunity.

We went on to talk of the new government and its prospect of life. In the week before I was incapacitated political passion in London rose higher than I have ever known it. The old government, tired and indolent, half-hearted and uncaring, was losing the war beyond hopes of recovery. The new government had intrigued its way into place, selling its soul to Lord Northcliffe, as Faust sold his soul to the devil. . . . As a very independent member I was privileged to hear both opinions in approximately equal numbers and certainly with equal violence of expression. I described to O'Rane two characteristic meetings within five minutes of each other. I had been walking from my office to lunch at the County Club one day, when I stopped to observe an unusual number of cars and a considerable crowd of loafers outside the Reform Club. George Oakleigh came up from behind and asked what I was watching.

"It's the party meeting," he explained. "Aren't you going?"

"Not invited, George," I said. "I'm left out of these pleasant little gatherings. What are they meeting about?"

"To hear a statement from Asquith. There'll be a vote of confidence, I suppose. He's still the leader of the Liberal Party!" he proclaimed with a note of challenge.

"This partisan enthusiasm is new to you," I commented.

Any hint of raillery was lost on him.

"I daresay it is!" he cried. "I was a candid friend in the old '06 parliament, I've voted against them a score of times, but, when I see how they held the country together in the first shock of the war, when I see what they did . . . And now to be turned out by a low press conspiracy and a man who owes his political salvation to Asquith, a man who was pulled out of the gutter at the time

of the Marconi scandal . . . when the whole party nearly split. My God! talk about gratitude in politics!"

He hurried away still most unwontedly explosive, and I followed more slowly. At the corner of St. James' Square I found Beresford also watching the crowd. (It was our last meeting before he called on me in the afternoon of our tragic expedition.)

"They're broken! Their noses are in the dirt,—and thank God for it!" he cried, pointing excitedly across the road. "*They* were responsible! *They* dragged us into the war, it was *their* war, *their* diplomacy! Asquith, Haldane and Grey. And now they're in the gutter!"

I remember walking on to luncheon with both conceptions to digest as an appetiser.

O'Rane and I talked long of political futures. The Government had resigned without challenge or defeat; we may have felt that we ought to have been consulted, as a compliment to the unfailing support which we had given; we might even dislike the new ministry's mode of birth, but we agreed in thinking that we must give the new management a trial before reverting to those who had failed to keep order in their own home. Suddenly O'Rane interrupted me with a question which shewed that his thoughts had been for some time at a distance from domestic politics.

"Er—Stornaway," he said with noticeable nervousness. "You remember when you came to see me at Melton some weeks ago? You were going to set enquiries on foot to find out where Sonia had got to."

I told him what had been done and how we had failed. There had not been many days for me between giving my promise of help and involving myself in the encounter with Grayle, but George and his sleuth-hound colleague continued to ransack every resource suggested by friendship or professional pique. And at the end of three weeks they were as near finding her as at the beginning.

"She is either staying with friends or hiding away in rooms somewhere," I told O'Rane as my conclusion. "And I can't suggest any way of tracking her down. It's a

waste of time to advertise; she's hiding, because she doesn't want to be found. If I may advise you, wouldn't it be wiser to leave her where she is? I take it that you've stopped proceedings?"

"I've stopped proceedings," he answered, and his chin dropped forward on to his chest so that I should not see the movements of his thin face.

"Then there's nothing to discuss with her. If at any time in the future she or you want to regain your liberty, you can start out to get in touch with her then. Any question of stopping her allowance is mere persecution—and I don't even know that it's likely to be successful persecution. She drew a cheque for twenty pounds on the day she left Grayle; and she's not drawn a penny since. It'll take some time to exhaust her balance, and, if she finds that her quarterly cheque isn't being paid regularly, you know even better than I do that she'll starve or beg or work her fingers to the bone before she'll give in."

O'Rane was long without answering. Then he dragged himself out of the chair, shook hands and bade me goodnight.

"I must have a look for her myself," he murmured, as though he were thinking aloud.

"O'Rane, she's clearly avoiding you," I pleaded. "Will it do any good?"

"I *must* meet her!" he cried tremulously.

If I said a very brutal thing then, I said it because I thought that in the long run it was kindest.

"Let me tell you one thing before you go," I begged him. "O'Rane, you're not facing realities, you know; you're playing with the idea of reconciliations, you think that it's possible to get your wife back and to live with her again. My dear boy, you must use your imagination. Think of the mental process that took her away, think what her experience has been, think what her mental state must be now. She will never come back to you. And you couldn't live with her, even if she did."

O'Rane went out of the room without answering by word or gesture.

2

On Christmas Day George came into my room after dinner. He betrayed considerable excitement and was carrying a stout red book in one hand.

"I've tracked her down!" he exclaimed almost before the door was closed.

"Tracked who down?" I asked without any great interest.

"Sonia. I caught sight of her at the Savoy—outside the Savoy, rather—after lunch. The Maitlands were giving a party, and, as we came out into the court-yard, Gerald Deganway put up his eye-glass and dug me in the ribs. Then I saw her in some kind of livery or uniform, driving a car. She didn't see me, and I don't think she wanted to be seen, because she was sitting rather hunched up and with her face turned away. . . . Then an old general stumped out and told her where to go; she said, 'Yes, sir,' turned the head of the car and drove away. I just had time to see the number and I spent a useful hour or two this afternoon finding who it belonged to. Apparently the old boy calls himself Brigadier-General Sir Andrew Lampwood. Now we'll turn him up in 'Who's Who.'"

He dropped into a chair, filled a pipe and began to turn the pages. General Lampwood, I gathered from his fragmentary recital, had been educated at Eton and Sandhurst . . . had served in Egypt, India, Egypt again and South Africa . . . despatches, medals, clasps . . . a widower with two sons . . . one house in Wilton Crescent and another in Norfolk. . . Naval and Military, Turf, Ranelagh. . . .

"Well, if Raney wants her, he knows where to find her," he ended. "I suppose you've never met this Lampwood? No more have I." He shut the book with a snap and drummed with his knuckles on the binding. "No wonder we couldn't find her; she's probably living in rooms near

by, driving for him all day. . . . I'm surprised that nobody should have seen her till to-day; she's so well-known, and it's the sort of thing the picture-papers love to get hold of." He sniffed contemptuously. "'Recruit to the Ranks of Society War-Workers!' . . . I suppose she can only just have felt that she must do something and have somewhere to live——"

"Do you find people still talking about her?" I interrupted.

"They always have and they always will." He lay back and smoked for a few moments in a reflective silence. "Ever since she came out. . . . Of course, she's a really beautiful woman—always has been—and she's got a lot of glib society patter and she *can* make herself almost irresistible to most men. As she would say herself, her technique is perfect. And, if you never waste your energy on emotions, I suppose you're left with a tremendous lot for your precious technique. She can be so charming to everyone, when she likes, that she'll make a success of anything from a sticky dinner to a charity bazaar. She was always a success, she knew it, she got temperamentally drunk on it—until I think that the only thing she cared about was being admired, wanted, loved. . . . And now she's driving a car for a dug-out general. . . ."

"But what are people saying about her?" I persisted.

"Oh, the old scandal's been toned down to almost nothing. She was being seen about with Grayle too much, and Raney put his foot down and said it was to stop." He grinned maliciously. "Lady Pentyre told me at lunch to-day that it was perfectly abominable the way people went about *inventing* lies—and about a *sweet* girl like that! It came so well from Lady Pentyre."

He smoked in silence until O'Rane came in for the five minutes that he always spared me on his way to bed. George repeated what he had told me and asked if there was anything that he could do.

O'Rane listened without any change of expression and then said that he would write to Lady Dainton.

"There's nothing more you'd like me to do?" George asked again.

There was a moment's hesitation in which O'Rane's unsmiling face became graver.

"Well, I can't do it for myself," he said and paused again. "I—I wonder if it would be possible for you to get a word with Sonia—find out what time she starts in the morning and then intercept her——"

"Well?" George encouraged him.

"I wouldn't bother you, if I could see," O'Rane resumed apologetically. "Tell her that if she wants anything——"

I felt that it was time to interfere.

"She can go to her parents," I said. "O'Rane, we're all of us different men and women every day of our lives, we're always changing, never the same. Some things change us more rapidly than others, marriage, illness, great prosperity or great disaster, the death of a friend—my dear boy, I'm only telling you what you know already. Because your name doesn't change, because you look the same and your hair doesn't turn white from illness or grief, you think that *you're* the same. You're *not*. And *she's* not. Since you parted, there have been changes and developments in both your souls which will prevent your ever coming together again. You don't like me to say it, but you'll have to recognise it."

The boy's eyes seemed to shine with reflected pain at every word.

"But isn't there room for something new?" he asked. "A man may love a woman with all his heart and soul, he may marry her, she may die; in time he may marry again—without forgetting her, without transferring the affection he once gave her—leaving her in the place where she's always been since she died, but somehow creating a new love. Don't you think that when two people . . . separate, the husks of their love may die . . . their old love, I mean, they may even hate the memory of it, but in time, perhaps, a new one may be born . . . ?"

"Between the same people? My friend, the memory of the separation, the reasons for it, will rise up like ghosts to keep them apart. You want her to come back?"

For the first time a wan smile lit up his thin face.

"Do you wonder?"

"What can you give her that you didn't give her before?" I persisted.

He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed.

"I shouldn't like to think that a second chance is always thrown away."

"And what inducement can you offer?" I asked him brutally.

He spread out his hands with a shrug.

"What inducement did I offer before? We've been in love with each other so long! At one time she was actually engaged to another man. . . . But there was something constant and unchanging. She didn't forget him or hate him, but in time she had adjusted herself and come back to the thing that had always been there, hidden and unchanged. . . . So now, isn't it possible that, when the last six months fall into their proper perspective, when the ghosts no longer rise up——"

"How many people have you known to marry a second time after they've been divorced?"

"But there's no reason why they shouldn't."

"In fact they don't," I said.

I believe that George delivered himself of his message within about three days. I believe, further, that he descended to bribe some smirking kitchen-maid and stood through a downpour of rain to seize the opportunity. Mrs. O'Rane masked any surprise that she felt—I suppose that she must have been taking part in many unexpected meetings,—thanked him for troubling to come and transferred her attention to the wind-screen, as a choleric voice remarked, "Now, young man, when you've quite finished talking to my chauffeur!"

The meeting confirmed my own diagnosis. The play was ended, and, if I concerned myself with wondering what

O'Rane and his wife would do with the remainder of their lives, I felt that this would be a new play, no continuation of the first. The brief scandal had flickered out as abruptly as it had flared up. Lady Maitland—my barometer and sounding-board—announced to Bertrand across the length of a considerable table that she had seen darling Sonia, who had really turned over a new leaf; it was the best thing in the world; she was taking the war seriously at last.

"Do you know, that dear child is never off duty Sundays or week-days, night or day?" she confided. "You try to get her to lunch or dine—she'll tell you frankly that it's not the least use promising, because, if her General wants her, out she has to go and she may be driving for him all night. I don't see how she *can* keep it up—not seeing anyone, you know, or doing anything, and after the life she *had* been leading. Of course, she was really very naughty about the way she did it—all in a night, you know—threw everybody over—I was running an entertainment on behalf of my society, and she simply spoilt one tableau. . . . But then that's so like darling Sonia."

"She's less of a fool than I thought," was Bertrand's comment to me. "No awkward questions, nobody to meet her and ask them! Can't live at home when she has to be ready with the car at a moment's notice. . . . I hope General Sir Andrew Lampwood has broad shoulders. . . . She's snug and secure till the war's over, and God knows when that will be."

I made no answer, for I was thinking of O'Rane. On New Year's Eve he had dined at home with George and Bertrand, and all three came up to my room afterwards. We made a despondent party, for the endlessness of the war daunted us as the third year added month to month with lengthening casualty lists and a growing sense that, when we had already failed so many times and in so many ways, there was no reason why we should not go on failing. Each one of us was far enough from reality to be conscious of helplessness and insufficiency; I could not count the number

of times that Bertrand had growled, "I've done with the House! I'm not going down there any more. What *good* can we do?"—the number of times, too, that he repented and saw the House as the one independent and courageous check on an imbecile and malign government. Stripped of all mental elasticity and enthusiasm, George hated the Admiralty with a savage ferocity that was made no less by the easy youth which he had passed, uncontrolled, undisciplined and effortless. And underneath our nervous depression and irritability lay a despondent sense that the moral grandeur of the war had become obscured.

"I suppose the pace was too hot," George observed gloomily. "But in those first weeks . . . They may not have known what they were going out to face, but they went like good 'uns; and the people who stayed behind were ready for any sort of sacrifice of money, comfort, leisure. All the spiritual fervour seems to go now in trying to make *other* people do things, keeping *other* people up to the mark. . . . God! I'm sick of the press agitations, I'm sick of all this political intrigue, I suppose I'm sick of the war."

O'Rane nodded, but made no answer.

"I don't ask anyone to listen to me," George went on with unwonted bitterness, "because I've been wrong all through. So have you, Bertrand. We were wrong before the war, when we said there couldn't be a war; and we were wrong when we started yapping about a 'war to end war.' We can't even make a clean job of this, we can't make the Hun put up his hands and say he'll go back to the *status quo*, and as for dismembering Germany and deposing the Kaiser—we can't do it! But when I remember my own tom-fool speeches at the beginning——"

"But we couldn't keep out of it, George," O'Rane interjected.

"And precious little good we've done by going in. I suppose we *have* stopped Germany from dominating Europe, but, as for our own honour, we offered that up on the altar of necessity when we found that we were fighting a nation

that meant to win if it darned well could. Our later policy's become frankly imperialistic; there's no ethical connection between Belgian neutrality and the partition of Turkey and Austria. I'm afraid I've taken a deuced long time to see it. . . ." He turned to me with a scornful smile. "Do you remember when you first came back to England? When we met outside the Admiralty?"

"I've often thought of that conversation," I said.

"Everything seemed to follow so naturally in those days," he sighed. "Disarmament, nationality, a tribunal to arbitrate between states. Raney, you were one of the most persistent optimists I've had the ill-luck to meet; you're not going to pretend that the entire thing's not the most futile, gigantic waste . . . whole peoples in arms hacking themselves to death and not a damned thing gained! *You* don't think we're going to win this war?"

For the first time in six months I saw O'Rane roused to impersonal interest.

"I don't know if anybody's going to win," he answered. "And, what's more, I don't greatly care."

"If you were back in August, '14?" George asked, looking him in the eyes and then quickly turning away.

"I'd go through it again," was the quiet reply.

George got up and began to pace restlessly up and down the room.

"The big thing about this war is quite independent of results," O'Rane explained. "It's the effect on the individual, the effort, the risk, the readiness to make sacrifice. I always hold that there's no room in life for compromise. You know that, don't you, George?" He held out his hand and pulled George on to the arm of his chair. "From the days when we were at Melton together. You and dear old Jim Loring and Tom Dainton—dear God! how this war has killed them off!—you used to thrash me, you brutes, to make me see that I must compromise, but you never won. And always before the war I thought that compromise—what I call moral cowardice and spiritual slovenliness—was the only thing that people minded about. They

didn't *care*. It wasn't their *business!* If the world was cruel and licentious or base-minded, they always asked me to remember that human nature was human nature." He sprang up with a sudden wriggle as though he were jerking an incubus from his shoulders. "As a nation we were contented with the second-rate—compromise, toleration, ease; we were second-rate in life, art, politics, second-rate in humanity, in soul. . . . And then there came the war—and it was the big moment when we had to decide whether to fight our way through the flames or to stand in distant security and explain to the reporters that there was a child, sure enough, in the top storey, but that it would be suicide to attempt a rescue and what was the fire brigade for, anyway? . . . We had to decide, we had to make up our minds that there was something big enough to suffer and sacrifice ourselves for. . . . All of us who went out there thought, rightly or wrongly, that we'd found something that admitted of no compromise. . . . Even if you went out of bravado, like poor Val Arden, so as not to be thought a funk . . . What it was—I don't quite know . . ." he went on slowly. "I doubt if any of us know, and we certainly didn't at the time. Perhaps it was for the security of the people at home. . . . I know I was seeing red, I'd have slit the throats of German women and children at that time —in revenge for what they did in Belgium. . . . But before that started, before war was declared . . . You remember that last week-end of the Saturnia regna, George? When we walked up and down, up and down at Loring Castle, wondering whether there was anything worth saving. . . . Well, whenever I catch myself feeling as you do now, I recall that about four million men voluntarily decided that there was something in life better than their own lives, something that had to be preserved, something that ruled out all compromise. That's the moral value of war. After all, what is it you do when you run into the flames and rescue the kiddie from the top storey? You save its life, I admit, and that's something, if you value human life, but the child may die a week later of whooping-cough, it may

grow into a drunkard, an imbecile, a criminal. What matters it that you've taken yourself, your own soul, and given it a value? . . . When this is all over, if we lose, if we're bankrupt and broken, if Germany enchains us like so many tribes of African blacks, it still doesn't matter to the men who refused to compromise, they've made themselves. . . . Yes, quite deliberately, I'd—go through it—all—again. . . . And, when the war's over, we can't afford to tolerate anything but the best, we haven't been fighting for the second-rate. And we've got to prepare our own minds for that now, so that the material changes follow automatically. You must start with the individual, your *own* relationship to the world in all its aspects. Hanging for sheep-stealing ceased automatically when the public mind had prepared itself, stirred itself up to say 'This has got to *stop!*' and the compromisers, the obscurantists, the vested interests daren't raise their heads. You think, perhaps, that I'm not the best person to decry the usefulness of compromise——"

He stopped abruptly, and all the light and colour died out of his big eyes.

Bertrand, whom I thought to be dozing, raised his head for a moment and lowered it again.

"Didn't Saint Paul say something about being all things to all men?" he asked gently. "Saint Paul was a great diplomatist, a great man of the world. You'd say he was a great compromiser, David, but at least he knew how to suit himself to his audiences, to make allowances for poor, despised human nature. And perhaps you'll even admit that he was not altogether unsuccessful and that Christianity would never have spread a hundred miles from Jerusalem but for him. I sometimes think he has been unduly neglected," he continued with a yawn. "Christianity would have been a poor thing without him."

"It would have been a poorer thing without Christ," O'Rane answered. "And there would have been no Christianity at all, if Christ had said that the Scribes and Pharisees were doing their best according to their lights . . . or that we must make allowances for Dives because he had a

great many calls on his charity and really couldn't investigate each one personally. Of course, there'd have been no Crucifixion. . . ."

3

The Christmas holidays passed rapidly, and I remember that O'Rane told me one Sunday night that he would be going back to Melton in another ten days' time. None of us cared to ask him how much longer he proposed to continue this make-shift life, teaching seventeen-year-olds for nine months in the year and learning procedure in the House of Commons during the remainder; it was his means of trying to forget that his wife was in the same city, living within a mile or two of him, driving perhaps within a hundred yards of their house or passing him in the street, elusive and unattainable.

After George's glimpse and single meeting, we heard little of her. George told me that he had met "Sonia's General," as that no doubt gallant soldier came to be called with unflattering disregard of earlier and more varied achievements, that he was an agreeable fellow, that someone was putting him up for the Eclectic Club. They fell into conversation and discussed the prowess of the new driver; the General had been taken completely by surprise.

"If she'd said 'Sonia Dainton,' anyone would have known," he explained. "I'd forgotten she was married. She suits me uncommon well,—if she can stand the strain. . . ."

A day or two later Bertrand made the General's acquaintance and came home with the not very surprising news that Mrs. O'Rane had terminated her engagement.

"I never supposed that phase would last long," he grunted. "Up early, back late, out in all weathers and thankful if you can snatch five minutes to munch a sandwich out of a paper bag. There'd be very little of this boasted 'war-work' done, Stornaway, if people weren't allowed to go about in uniform, and none at all, if the first condition of your employment was that no one was allowed

to know that you were doing war-work of any kind. *I* can see the offices and hospitals yielding up their social ornaments! Well, Sonia O'Rane's at least honest about it. A week or two with only a livery and no one to admire her——!"

"She's got no excuse now for living anywhere but at home," I commented.

Bertrand grunted scornfully.

"Give her credit for a little more contrivance than that! She leaves her General at the end of the month, by which time her husband will be safely back in the country. But she hopes to take it up again, when she's a bit stronger. I had this from the General; he shewed me her letter. Damned ill-written scrawl," he added with the intolerance which ran away with him whenever his prejudices were aroused. "She'll recuperate by lunching and dining out and dancing and staying up till all hours; and the moment David comes back to London she'll be well enough to go back to her precious work. You see if I'm not right."

This time, however, Bertrand's ingenuity and malice overreached themselves, for we heard from Lady Maitland that Mrs. O'Rane was genuinely ill.

"I used to see her every morning," she told George, "as I went to Harrod's, and nine times out of ten we had just a word together. Then I missed her, then I saw the car being driven by someone else. I hope it's nothing serious."

The conversation took place at a luncheon party where O'Rane was present. George took it upon himself to reassure her, but from the fact that Mrs. O'Rane had disappeared even more completely than after leaving Grayle there was a risk in fabricating good or bad news about her. General Lampwood supplied her address, and one evening when there was nothing better to do George went round to her lodgings. They consisted of a bed-sitting room in a street off Wilton Crescent conveniently near to the garage. She was in bed, and the landlady doubted whether visitors would be very welcome, as she was suffering a good deal of pain.

"That decided me," George told me. "She hadn't actually said she wouldn't see anyone, because I'm pretty sure she didn't think it would be necessary. I gave her the surprise of her life when I marched in; she couldn't imagine how I'd heard she was ill, how I'd found out her address. . . . She's now suffering from the most awful reaction after the racket of the last year. Nothing that I said or did was right; she was as lonely as a woman could be and at the same time resented my coming, resented my saying she looked rotten and ought to see a doctor. . . ." He frowned and shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "She needn't bother. She won't catch me going there a second time."

Yet rather less than ten hours passed before he was caught going there a second time. Indeed he can hardly have left the house before Mrs. O'Rane was writing in contrition—"Darling George, do forgive me if I was snappy and ungracious, but I *did* feel so rotten! It was my own fault that nobody came to see me, because nobody knew where I was, but I felt so horribly neglected, I was so furious with everybody for *not* coming to see me, that when you came into the room I laid myself out to be hateful. . . . My dear, I did really feel iller than I can tell you, so forgive me! Sonia."

"I suppose if I collect a few flowers . . ." George began apologetically next morning. "I shan't be able to stay more than a moment, or I shall be so frightfully late at the office . . . I might get my cousin Violet to look her up, of course."

I was never told how he found Mrs. O'Rane on the occasion of his second visit, but in the evening young Lady Loring paid us an unexpected visit. I did not see her, but, when she had gone, George came into my room with an expression of worried perplexity.

"Violet's been sitting most of the day with Sonia," he explained. "I wonder if *you* guessed. . . . I confess I never thought of it for one moment. Sonia's going to have a child very shortly."

I, too, was taken by surprise and needed a moment to arrange my thoughts.

"You're sure of that?" I asked.

"She told Violet. The question is—what are we going to do with her? She's got to be properly looked after and she's got to be moved out of her present pokey little room. . . . I suppose it means a nursing home. Violet suggested taking her to Loring House, but that was more generous than practical. I'm afraid there's no doubt Sonia did behave very badly to Jim Loring when she was engaged to him . . . and Violet knows it and doesn't forgive her . . . and Sonia doesn't forgive her for knowing it. *You* know what women are. Violet's got all the sweetness in the world, she *thinks* she doesn't bear a grudge, she can call on Sonia in bed, make a fuss of her . . . but it's different to take her into her own house, particularly with the associations that house must have for Sonia. But I needn't labour the point; the suggestion was turned down almost as soon as it was made. Well, she can't go to her mother, because Crowley Court's overflowing with wounded soldiers; and I don't know that she's overwhelmingly anxious to meet her mother. She can't come here, of course."

He stood reflectively rubbing his chin.

"Whose child is it going to be?" I asked.

"Grayle's the father. I suppose that, as Raney's taken up his present attitude——" He left the sentence unfinished and began to fill a pipe. "Ye gods, what a sweet mess people can get themselves into!"

"When's the event expected?"

"Pretty soon, I fancy. Violet didn't tell me the exact date, but she did give me to understand very plainly that Sonia mustn't be left by herself any longer. She was extraordinarily overwrought and hysterical, when I saw her, but for some reason or other I never imagined . . . I say, Stornaway, if it had been Raney's child, if this had happened a year ago?"

"Nothing would have saved them," I answered, "though it might have kept them artificially together, making a hell

of each other's lives, when they'd be far happier apart. O'Rane was more responsible than any man for the break-up of their life; Grayle was only the instrument. The tragedy began when they married."

George smiled grimly.

"I suppose even Raney will see it, when his wife gives birth to another man's child. . . . And *then* what? Will he divorce her then? Have we got to go through all this racket again? In the meantime the nursing-home problem——"

He stopped guiltily, as the door opened and O'Rane came in to say good-night to me.

"Who's been to call here?" he asked George. "I met a car driving away."

"It was Violet Loring."

"Oh, I wish I'd known that! When next you see her, you can tell her she's a rude pig not to have pulled up. She must have seen me."

"She was in rather a hurry," George explained. "As a matter of fact, it was me she came to see."

I suppose his voice betrayed uneasiness or at least embarrassment, for O'Rane turned to him with quick sympathy.

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" he asked. "The boy's all right?"

"Oh, it wasn't that." George looked at me almost despairingly, but I could only shrug my shoulders and leave him to make up his own mind. "She came in to say that Sonia's a bit seedy," he went on. "I—as a matter of fact, I saw her for a moment yesterday and, as she was rather off colour, I thought it would be a friendly act for Vi to look her up. I don't know if you heard Lady Maitland telling me at lunch the other day that she was a bit done up."

O'Rane's face became rigid, and his voice was as set as his features.

"I didn't hear anything about it. I—You ought to have told me, George. What's the matter with her?"

George looked at me again, without winning any more help than before.

"I only saw her for a moment," he answered evasively. "She seemed rather overdone."

"But who's looking after her?"

"Nobody much at present. That was what Violet came about: she'd been to see her and thought it would be more comfortable if she were moved into a nursing home."

Nature must compensate the blind by developing their other qualities. Though he could not see George's studiedly non-committal face, O'Rane divined something hidden from him in the easily reassuring voice.

"Old man, I don't think that's the whole story, is it?" he asked with persuasive gentleness. "The nursing-home rather gives you away. Has Sonia got to have an operation?"

"There's no suggestion of it! Violet says it's nothing out of the ordinary."

"Then why a nursing-home?"

"Because she wants rather more attention than she's likely to get in her present quarters. But there's not the slightest need for you to worry yourself."

O'Rane began to pace up and down the room, chewing his lips.

"She must come here, of course," he said at length.

This time I looked up at George.

"You won't find that practicable, O'Rane," I said.

"Why not?"

"She won't come."

"Because of me, you mean? I'll clear out, if she prefers it; I should be clearing out in any event at the end of the week. But it's her home."

"You can't bring her home by force."

O'Rane's eyes lit up with sudden, burning passion.

"If I had my sight, I'd bring her myself! As I haven't, George is going to bring her for me. Yes, you are, George. You're going to take a car and have her carried into it and brought here. If she objects, you're going to make her.

I'll leave the house when she tells me to. You don't understand me, you wouldn't understand me, if you lived to be a thousand; but I took an oath and I'm going to keep it. I swore in the sight of God that I would hold her in sickness and in health to love and to cherish till death parted us. I said it with her hand in mine . . . in Melton chapel . . . and I could feel her fingers trembling. It was a scorching July day, and I could feel the sun coming hot on my face. . . . I'd never been at a wedding before, for some reason; we'd rehearsed it, and Sonia'd told me how I had to stand and what I had to say. . . . And I kept repeating the words as we came out into the Cloisters—it was cold as the grave, and I felt her shivering as she leant on my arm. And then there was a word of command and a rattle as the Corps presented arms. . . . And we came out into Great Court, and I could feel the sun again. And we were marched off to Little End, and I heard a lot of yelping, and something with a cold nose pressed against my hand, and Sonia gave a little choke and said that Pebbleridge had turned out the hounds in our honour. . . . And before we went to Burgess' house—the words were still running in my head—I whispered 'I will love you, comfort you, honour and keep you in sickness and in health, forsaking all other.' I swore it then and I should be damned if I went back on it. This is her first sickness since we were married, and I'm not going to leave her to go through it alone until she tells me to."

His voice rang with excitement until the room echoed and Bertrand came in with eyebrows raised.

"You don't in the least understand, Raney," George began in difficulty and distress. "You were quite right; I hadn't told you the whole story——"

"I don't want to hear any more—yet," O'Rane interrupted. "I shouldn't be asking you to do this, if I could do it myself."

"Was that necessary?" George asked with a touch of stiffness and impatience. "I'll go whenever you want me to."

"You must go now. Ring up Violet and tell her to meet you there in half an hour with her car; you'll want a woman to help you. The rest of us will have our work cut out to get things ready here. Stornaway, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I shall have to find you a shake-down in some other part of the house; this is Sonia's room. Don't waste a moment, George——"

"I suppose you know it's after eleven," George interrupted.

"Move her to-night, if she's fit to move. Let Violet decide that."

George looked from Bertrand to me and turned helplessly to the door. O'Rane had already rung my bell and was standing in the passage tattooing the floor with impatient foot and waiting for his housekeeper. I spread a bath-towel in the middle of the floor and began to pile on it my exiguous personal effects, while Bertrand seated himself heavily in an arm-chair and begged for enlightenment. A moment later the front-door slammed, as George set out.

For an hour we worked hard to make the house ready for Mrs. O'Rane. Bertrand's one comment, when I explained the new commotion, was, "The boy's mad! *She* won't come," and from time to time, when he was being urged and driven to a fresh task, he would remonstrate gently and warn O'Rane not to be disappointed. There was never any answer. By midnight our labours were complete: the bedrooms had been reshuffled and beds made, food and drink prepared. We met in the library with vague uncertainty what to do next.

"You must tell me if it looks all right," O'Rane said to Bertrand. "I want it to look exactly as it was before. She always loved this room, and I believe it *is* a beautiful room."

Bertrand glanced perfunctorily round and laid his hand clumsily on the boy's shoulder.

"I told you before, David; you're going to be terribly disappointed, if you think she's coming."

"*I* would have undertaken to bring her!" he cried. "We

can trust George. And I don't suppose he'll even say where he's taking her."

"If she doesn't know where she's coming," I interrupted, "you'd better keep out of the way till she says she'd like to see you."

"I must welcome her," O'Rane answered.

Bertrand and I exchanged glances and excused ourselves. As we turned at the door, O'Rane was standing with his watch to his ear. About three-quarters of an hour later I heard a car slowing down in the street outside.

George has told me since that his cousin and he found their patient far less difficult than they had feared. She was plunged in melancholy bordering on hysteria. Loneliness, pain and neglect had reduced her pride until she sat up in bed with her face contorted and tears trickling down her cheeks, reproaching them for never coming to see her and bitterly proclaiming that she *now* knew how much trust to put in people when they said that they were her friends. George took her hand and explained that he had come to take her away where she would be tended and made happy. At once there was an indignant outburst; she would not move, she was quite well; if they would go away instead of bullying her, worrying her, threatening her, she would be all right in a moment. He let the storm spend itself and recaptured the hand that she had snatched away.

"Violet's told me what's the matter with you," he whispered. "Unless you're very quiet and good, you'll injure yourself. And you are going to be quiet and good, aren't you?" He was talking to her as though she were a child and she responded by throwing her arms round his neck and weeping convulsively. "You're going to be very good, aren't you, Sonia? And we're all going to take the greatest care of you. Violet's got her car here, and we're going to wrap you in a cloak and explain to your landlady that we're not really stealing the blankets, however much appearances may be against us, and we're going to take you away, and you're going to be in the midst of friends, and everybody's going to be kind and sweet to you, and you're going

to forget how lonely and miserable you've been the last few days."

He lifted her into a sitting position, while Lady Loring hunted for slippers and wrapped a cloak about her.

"I don't deserve it!" Mrs. O'Rane cried with sudden revulsion. "Why do you come here bothering me? It's my fault, I knew perfectly well what I was doing; I should never have done it, if he'd treated me properly, if he'd loved me. It was David's fault, you know it was; and you come here bothering me when I'm ill. . . ."

George helped her out of bed and supported her across the room. From time to time she muttered, "Why don't you leave me alone? It was *his* fault, but he could never do any wrong in your eyes!" like a sobbing child in the last stages of a tornado of temper. He carried her into the car, while Lady Loring poured out a hurried explanation to the landlady. A deep drowsiness descended upon her as she felt herself being packed into a bed of cushions, while a bearskin rug was wrapped round her, but, as the engine started, she opened her eyes and enquired sleepily where she was being taken.

"You're to go to sleep and not ask questions," said George. "Is that a promise? Say it quite slowly—'I—Sonia O'Rane —promise—that—I—will—go—to—sleep—*at*—*once*—quite —quietly—and—will—not—ask—*a n y*—questions.'" She laughed weakly and began to repeat the words, only stumbling at her own surname. "Once again!" George ordered. "I—Sonia O'Rane—promise. . . ." She struggled halfway through the sentence and then dropped asleep with her head pressed against his shoulder.

She was still sleeping when the car drew up at "The Sanctuary." The door stood open, George lifted her out and carried her across the pavement and into the house. The lights in the library were burning, and, as he carried her in with her head over his shoulder, she looked dully at the familiar book-cases and panelling, the high, shadowy rafters, the chairs and sofas and the preparations for a meal on the refectory table. He had borne her half-way

across the room, when she recognised her surroundings and struggled violently to free herself. George had perforce to lay her on a sofa before she threw herself out of his arms. As he did so, O'Rane came up from behind.

"I asked George to bring you here," he explained. "I thought you'd be more comfortable at home."

She dragged herself to her feet and hurried uncertainly to the door.

"My dear, you can't go out in that state!" said Lady Loring, as she laid restraining hands on her shoulders.

"Let me go! It was a *trick!* You lied to me!"

O'Rane slipped forward and touched her wrist.

"I thought you'd be more comfortable at home," he repeated. "You won't find me in the way, I'm going back to Melton. I was only staying to see that you had everything you wanted."

"Let me go!" she cried again, shaking his fingers off her wrist.

"No, I'm going. But isn't it more comfortable?"

She looked stonily round, and her eyes came to rest on his face.

"Oh, yes. It's more comfortable. Now may I go, please?"

"You had better stay. Let me help you upstairs, and then I'll leave the house. I was hoping you'd be glad to be back. And I'd waited so long."

He smiled and held out his hands to her. She looked at him for a moment; then her eyes closed, and she began to sway.

"Take me home!" she whimpered, as George sprang forward to catch her.

"You must stay here to-night."

"I *ask* you to take me home!"

O'Rane put one arm under her shoulders, and the other under her knees.

"It's too late now, and you're tired, darling," he whispered. "To-morrow, if you like. I'm just going to carry you up to bed, as I used to do at Crowley Court when you

were twelve and I came over for the holidays. Do you remember? And then I'll say good-night, and Violet will put you to bed and take care of you. Don't struggle, Sonia sweetheart! You can't hate me so much that you can't bear to let me touch you or carry you up a flight of stairs when you're ill."

4

As I kept deafly and pusillanimously to my room, I am far from sure what happened during the remainder of the night. O'Rane, I believe, carried his wife up to bed, left her in charge of Lady Loring and accepted from the tired butler at Loring House an armchair in the library for his own accommodation. Bertrand was already in bed, I heard George going to bed as the car started outside; by two o'clock all was quiet.

I remember that, when I was young enough to play baccarat for high stakes and impressionable enough to be embarrassed by a scene, I stayed in a house where certain unpleasantness took place at the card-table. The dispute and recriminations were bad enough, the night of reflection —after a dozen final councils adjourned from bedroom to bedroom—was worse, but worst of all was our uncertain meeting next day, when we stood whispering by the fire in the dining-room, peevishly waiting for breakfast and watching the door to see whether the cause of the unpleasantness would shew himself. Bertrand, George and I stood whispering next morning with much the same embarrassment; breakfast lay on the table, and none of us paid any attention to it. The time was early for me and late for George; I have no idea at what hour Bertrand usually rose, but I remember he was soothing himself with the first cigarette I had ever seen him smoke, at intervals forgetting that it was not a cigar and trying to hold it between his teeth.

Our attitude of vague expectancy was broken up by the arrival of Lady Loring in a creased, black evening dress with a travelling rug over her shoulders. Her eye-lids were pink with fatigue and her arms mottled with cold.

"We look a nice band of conspirators!" she exclaimed. "Now, will *some*body tell me what it's all about?"

"How's Sonia?" George asked.

"She went to sleep the moment her head touched the pillow and she was sleeping like a child whenever I looked at her. I think you're all needlessly alarmed about her, but then you're only men. *I've* been through it all, so I know exactly what it feels like to imagine you're being neglected. But what does anybody want me to do?"

She beckoned us to the table and sat down rather wearily, looking from one to another.

"The trouble is, dear lady," Bertrand grunted, "that we don't know. I suppose you've heard that these two young idiots have had a disagreement? Does that young woman upstairs know where she is?"

"She'll know the moment she wakes up. Is David here?"

"He said he'd beg a shakedown at your house, Violet," George interrupted.

Lady Loring hummed dubiously.

"To judge from her condition yesterday," she ventured, "she's hardly accountable for her actions. It's not to be wondered at, you know, when you think what she's been through—and the way she's lived on her nerves for years. If you'll tell me what you want done, of course . . ."

It was easier to concentrate our attention on breakfast. George soon hurried away to his office, Bertrand lighted a cigar and went off to a committee meeting, after stumping the library for half an hour, with the ends of his walrus moustache pulled into a circle, and murmuring at five-minute intervals, "What are two fat old men like *us* doing in this galley?" A telephone message from O'Rane enquired how his wife was, and Lady Loring took the opportunity of arranging with her maid for a supply of clothes to be sent round. The conversation reminded me of her vigil, and I told her that, if she would lie down until luncheon, I would take a book, a chafing-dish and a bowl of bread and milk and sit outside Mrs. O'Rane's door in case she wanted anything. Half-way through the morning

O'Rane tiptoed upstairs for a change of linen; Bertrand relieved guard while I went down and took a light meal with Lady Loring. It was not until three or four o'clock that I heard sounds of movement within the sick-room.

I went in to find Mrs. O'Rane considerably altered since our last meeting, but more collected than I had anticipated. She asked for food and, when I had brought her the bowl of bread and milk, begged me to stay and talk to her. Her first question was who had brought her to "The Sanctuary," and, when I had told her, she lay back on the pillows with closed eyes to avoid giving away any points.

"I feel better than I did yesterday," she said at length. "I shall go back to my own rooms to-day."

"You'll be wiser to stay here."

She smiled rather sneeringly.

"You think it's the simplest thing in the world for me to stay here."

"The wisest," I corrected her. "Your husband's not here, by the way, and you can be sure of being well looked after."

"Oh, don't say that again! You think it's *easy* for me to lie here and be looked after by people who despise me and hate me. . . ."

I got up and lifted the tray from her bed.

"I'm going to leave you now," I said. "Sleeping's much better for you than talking, and I'm afraid I've got rather a faculty for getting on your nerves."

Her lower lip at once fell and trembled with nervous contrition.

"I didn't mean to be rude, but I do feel so *ill!* And you *do* all hate me! To bring me *here!*"

She gave a single breathless sob, and tears began to well into her eyes and trickle down her cheeks. I pulled a chair to the bedside and took her hand.

"The older I get," I said, "the greater disparity I find between the theory and practice of hating. Theoretically I hate no end of a lot of people, but, if I had the power of venting my hatred on them, I don't see myself using it

much. As a matter of fact, I had a talk with George the other night about you; I said that the madcap life here was fantastically impossible, that your husband had himself to blame more than any other man for driving you out of the house——"

"That wasn't why I left him," she interrupted quickly.

"You didn't leave him because you thought he was unfaithful to you."

"I *know* he was. I had proofs."

"Supplied by Grayle?" I hazarded. She looked at me steadily without answering. "Well, when you've time, I should re-examine those proofs in the light of your general knowledge of your husband. If you're interested in my opinion of you"—her eyes lit up eagerly—"you'd sooner be insulted than ignored, wouldn't you?"—expectancy gave way to affected anger—"Well, I don't hate you, but you were a little fool to marry such a man; your instinct, your knowledge of life, your knowledge of him ought to have made it impossible. Having married him and considering his affliction, I blame you for not effacing yourself, obliterating your own individuality to stay with him. After that——" I dropped her hand and strolled to the window. "You were young, entitled to make your own life; it's not easy to justify, but it seems to follow almost naturally from the premisses. It happens to have turned out a failure, but no one can hate you for an error of judgement, particularly when you've shewn that your instinct about men is unreliable; you shewed it with O'Rane, I believe you shewed it before . . . and fortunately pulled up before it was too late. I feel this so strongly that I told O'Rane it would be a tragedy, if you ever tried to come back to him; there'd be a second catastrophe worse than the first. . . . I'm afraid he's too much in love with you to use his imagination."

She pressed the palms of both hands against her eyes.

"I can't stay here," she exclaimed irrelevantly. "I've no right to turn David out."

"You needn't worry about *that*. He's given you the right,

and you're turning him out for less than a week. For the matter of that——"

Her face grew suddenly set and her eyes scornful. "I suppose in spite of all the fine words this is all a trick to try and *force* me back here?"

"I've not the least doubt that O'Rane hopes you'll return to him," I told her frankly; "he probably will, even when he knows what's the matter with you,—no, he doesn't know even that at present;—but he's living in a fool's paradise."

With another of her quick facial regroupings—which is the only phrase I can find to indicate the shortening of a line here, its lengthening there, the droop or lift of the corners of her mouth, the dilatation of a pupil, the sudden gleam which turned her brown eyes almost golden, the tilt of the nose or the sudden birth of a dimple—she was smiling with her old demure self-confidence.

"I'm vain enough to think I can make almost any man want to live with me," she said, darting a glance from beneath lowered eyelashes.

"Come, that's more like yourself!" I laughed.

Thereupon the smiles and coquetry vanished as though I had struck her in the face. Yes, I had always hated her, always disapproved of her, regarded her as a flirt, taken everyone's side against her. There was no good in her, was there? Nothing ever to be said in her defence? . . . She lashed herself from one fury to another for ten minutes, only stopping from exhaustion and discouragement at my failure to answer.

"*I* could make him love me!" she panted in conclusion. "I shouldn't even need to make him, he's in love with me now. But *I* could make him happy. You think I can't. You think I can't! You *know* you think I can't!"

I laid my hand on hers; she slapped at it petulantly, but without any great desire to hurt, I fancied.

"Mrs O'Rane——"

"Why don't you call me Sonia?" she interrupted with complete detachment from all that we had been discussing.

"Everyone does. I suppose you prefer to keep—at a distance!"

And then I did a thing which still surprises me. I got up and sat on the edge of her bed. (There was a spring-mattress which I largely capsized, so that she was thrown half on her side.) I put one arm round her shoulders, drew her to me and kissed her on the forehead and both cheeks. I remember thinking at the time what an amazing thing it was to do, and the thought was confused with a knowledge that her face was dry and burning. She put her arms on my shoulders and returned the kiss; quite dispassionately I noticed that her lips were crumpled and dry as brown paper.

"Don't you think you're really rather a silly baby, Sonia?" I said. "If you could remember the times we've met, I should tell you frankly that for half of them I wanted to go away and keep at the farthest possible distance. For the other half——"

Her eyes brightened in anticipation of a compliment.

"Well?"

"It doesn't matter now. Why won't you believe that everyone here wants to help you?"

"Because I don't see why they should. I didn't expect it, I don't ask for it; I made up my mind at the time . . ."

She choked and drew herself closer to me, sobbing quietly but inconsolably until I felt her arms relaxing and laid her back on the pillows, a pathetically disfigured and moist piece of something that was above all wonderfully youthful.

"If you'll promise not to cry, I'll stay and talk to you," I said. "Otherwise——" I must have made some unconscious movement, for she clutched at my sleeve. "Do you promise? Well, I'm only a man. . . ."

She pulled herself suddenly upright.

"Where's David?" she demanded.

"At Loring House, I believe,—only a man, as I was saying, but I can tell you that you'll wear yourself out, if you go on like this. You've got a great grievance against all of us, you say we hate you and despise you; wouldn't it

be fairer *not* to say that till we've given you some better cause than you've had at present?"

Her teeth snapped like the cracking of a nut. Then the corners of her mouth drooped, and she began to cry again.

"If you *would* hit me!" Her head fell back until I could see only a quivering throat and the under side of her chin. "My God! what I've been through! No one knows! No one can *ever* know!"

I gave her some water to drink and asked leave to light a cigarette.

"When I was a small boy," I said, "there was a big oak press in my bedroom which used to reflect the firelight until I thought that all manner of goblins were coming out to attack me. I never got rid of the idea until I was shewn inside it by daylight—I remember it was full of the drawing-room summer chintzes;—then I never feared it again. Does it help you to talk about things, Sonia?"

Her face set itself again, but this time in resolution. For two hours I listened to the most terribly frank self-revelation that I am ever likely to hear. Like a sinner worked up to make confession, she told me of her life from the age of sixteen, when she had fallen romantically in love with O'Rane and when her mother had, quite properly, told her not be ridiculous. For years she had been incited—I had almost written "excited"—to make a great match; she had rushed into an engagement with an honoured title, half feeling all the time that she was pledged to the trappings of a man rather than to the man himself; and, when the engagement ended, she had set herself, like a prisoner at the triangles, to shew that it did not hurt, that she was not going to allow her capacity for enjoyment to be killed; and, when her own people looked askance at her, she had traded her charms among others who fawned on her and whom she despised. The outbreak of war found her unplaced—without mission or niche; she had thrown herself into war-work—and broken down, she had lain useless, neglected and tacitly contemned until she met O'Rane, blind and icily self-sufficient.

Then she had married him in the delirium of self-immolation, only to find that his passionate idealism for the future was transmuted into a white-hot zest to perfect the present. He was prepared to practise the Sermon on the Mount in a tweed suit and soft hat. For a month she shared his life as she would have partaken of an impromptu mid-night picnic in the Green Park. Then a homing instinct had rebelled against the promiscuous publicity of their life, she had felt that his love for her was diluted beyond taste by a vague devotion to mankind. She had treasured slights where no slights were intended and vented irritabilities where none was justified. His smiling patience had evoked a sense of hopelessness, followed by a desire for self-assertion. They had quarrelled, and, rather than admit herself in the wrong, she had blindly groped for evidence against him which the heat of inconvertible resentment would torture her into believing. Grayle had supplied it. . . .

She told me unreservedly of the conflicting influences upon her of three men at the same time. All were in love with her after their kind. O'Rane himself, most sympathetic with men and least understanding of women, gave her the keys and cheque-book of his life, imagining that undemonstrative, uncaressing fidelity would meet with like return; Beresford offered a romantic devotion which posed her frigidly among mountain snows and would have sent him through fire to avenge an insult to his idealised conception. And Grayle had strode in, compelling and indifferent, slighting and frightening her alternately, at a time when she was instinctively yearning to be called to order, taken in hand, shaken and even beaten.

"I was like the 'Punch' picture of the woman in a thunderstorm," she laughed. "I wanted a man there just to tell me not to make a fool of myself. Poor David never, never . . ."

Grayle desired her until she felt safe in playing with him, then he neglected her until in pique she set out to try the temper of her charms; ultimately he terrorised her

into a surrender which neither blind trust nor deaf devotion could compass.

She told me of her mood when she felt that Grayle was overpowering her, of her drunken willingness to believe what she knew was untrue. She described her parting with O'Rane as she might have described herself beating a child because she was out of temper and had to pretend that someone else was in fault. I was given an unsparing account of her life in Milford Square, which she entered with an unsubstantial hope that she would find love and a quivering sense that she had come like a dog to be beaten. Not a day and night had passed before she found that she had outstayed her welcome, that she was pressing on him for all his life what he desired for an unoccupied afternoon. Their life together was like the record of wife-beating by a besotted husband refined in method by the play of sarcastic wit on impressionable senses. At last there had come a day when he put into words the taunt that hitherto lacked only verbal clarity; she riposted with the charge that he was discarding her to clear the way to his political ambitions; every hoarded grudge and bitterness was dragged into the light, unseemly reproaches were uttered with the knowledge that all were exaggerated and most without foundation; and in a breathing-space both discovered that the articulation of such hidden and reserved acerbity made it impossible for them ever to live together again.

She had walked into the street with his last scurrility stinging her ears and cheeks until she found herself tearlessly crying. It was no use crying, when she needed all her wits to decide her next move, all her composure to face it. A lodging for the night had to be found in some place where she would not be interrogated, and for long her mind wavered slowly from one to another of the neighbourhoods in which she had lived and which all the while she knew were the first for her to reject—Rutland Gate, Manchester Square, Curzon Street, Westminster. It was hard to think of anywhere else; one needed a map, one of

those easy maps that were pasted on the walls of Underground stations. . . .

The long recital had exhausted her pent antagonism, and she described her experiences as General Lampwood's driver with humour and an occasional preening of her feathers.

"One day I knew I was going to have a child," she threw out abruptly. "It—it made me quite ill. Then—well, you know the rest. I'm not complaining. I never thought it was going to be easy or pleasant, but, if I had my time over again——"

"I think not, Sonia," I said.

"I never expected a bed of roses," she answered haughtily. Then she suddenly covered her face with her hands. "You mean I'm not through with it yet? Mr. Stornaway, is it—is it as bad as people say? I'm not a coward, really; I don't believe I should mind if I *wanted* it, if I were praying for a child, if it was going to be a child I should love. . . . That was what made me ill. When I first knew and I remembered the awful day when he turned me out of the house . . . I wanted to kill myself. There was a big motor lorry racing along Knightsbridge, and I made up my mind to step in front . . . as if I hadn't heard it. I stood on the kerb and put one foot forward. . . . Oh, but I wanted to live so badly! I couldn't, I simply couldn't! It was like tearing myself in two with my own hands. I just had time to think of next spring and all the early flowers coming up. . . . And then I knew that I should have to go through with it!"

Her eyes closed, and she lay without speaking until I made sure that she was asleep. I was treading lightly to the door when she called out and asked to be supplied with paper and a pencil.

"You're just in the mood to go to sleep," I protested.

She shook her head obstinately.

"I couldn't sleep, if I tried. You say David's at Loring House?"

"He spent last night there and looked in here this morning for clean clothes. I've no idea where he is now."

She looked at me with the set, unrevealing expression which I had seen once or twice already.

"Let me know if he comes in to-morrow," she said.

We had not to wait so long, for O'Rane, behind the pretext of packing books and clothes for his return to Melton, came in after dinner and examined me keenly on the condition of his wife. I mentioned that she had hinted at a desire to see him or at least to know his whereabouts, and, for all his control of himself, O'Rane's face was transfigured.

"I'm—here now," he said significantly.

"That means I'm to go up and find out if she wants to see you and if Lady Loring will let her?"

There was a sound of voices, as I knocked at the door—the nurse mildly begging her patient to go to sleep, Sonia resolutely and not too petulantly protesting that she had just finished. I delivered myself of my message, while she sat turning over a pile of manuscript and trying to read it and listen to me at the same time.

"Will you look at this?" she said at length.

She had written a condensed but pitiless version of the story which she had told me, starting with the day when she had chosen to believe that O'Rane was unfaithful to her and ending with the morning when she knew that she was going to bear Grayle a child.

"It's not very legible," she commented casually. "My writing's not up to much at the best of times, but when I'm in bed it's hopeless."

"I can read it," I said.

"I want you to read it to David," she went on in the same tone.

I raised my eyebrows, but said nothing.

"Will you do that for me?" she asked.

"If you wish it."

"Thank you very much. Now I think I shall go to sleep."

I went downstairs and led O'Rane to the far end of the

library. He stood with his hands in his pockets and his back to the fire, rocking in his old way from heel to toe.

"Have you read it?" he asked me, when I had explained his wife's request.

"Yes."

He held out his hand for the papers.

"And you remember everything she said?"

"Pretty well."

He rocked in silence for a moment and then smiled whimsically.

"I suppose you could—forget it, if you tried?" he suggested. "Perhaps it would help you to forget it, if we got rid of this. I usually burn myself when I start playing with fire; perhaps you wouldn't mind putting this in. Don't set the chimney alight, will you?"

5

The next morning I again mounted guard, while Lady Loring rested. We had agreed that, if no change for the worse shewed itself, it would be quite unnecessary to continue this day and night attendance. Physically Sonia was quite normal, but her nerves were unstrung, and for a time it had certainly looked as if hysteria might develop into something graver. Two nights' untroubled sleep, the belated recognition that she was among friends and, most of all, the relief of confession had braced her and built up her self-respect. When I went in to see her she was still a little defiant, but it was the defiance of courage.

"Is David here?" was her first question.

"He went back to Loring House when he'd finished his packing," I answered.

Sonia looked at me in silence, and her eyes narrowed.

"Oh! So *that's* it," she murmured at length.

"What is what?" I asked.

She sighed carelessly.

"You were right, and he was wrong, that's all. I was right too. . . . I knew that, when I left this house, I'd left

David for good; if I hadn't known it then, I knew it when —when we came here that night and he offered to drop the divorce if I'd leave—you remember? He thought he was somehow so different from other men. . . . What did he actually say?"

"He didn't say anything, Sonia. I think you're on the wrong tack. He just asked if I'd read the letter and if I remembered it. I said 'Yes.' Then he smiled and begged me to forget it."

"But didn't you read it to him?"

"He asked me to burn it."

She looked at me for some moments without understanding, then pulled herself lower into the bed and half turned away, shading her eyes with her hand. I walked to the window and gave her nearly a quarter of an hour to order her thoughts. At the end I asked her why she had written the letter.

"I felt I owed it to him," she said slowly. "I don't regret it, though I suppose it's a selfish sort of gratification. . . . If he'd left me alone, I should have said nothing, but when he went out of his way to have me brought here and looked after . . . I—suppose it's very magnanimous to burn a letter of that kind without reading it, but I'd sooner have had him read it. If he comes here, I shall have to tell him . . . . at least that I'm going to have a child. Please don't think that I'm running away from what I've done. I'm not trying to work on his feelings, I'm not trying to make him take me back; I couldn't go back, if he begged me, if his life depended on it."

"Then it doesn't matter much whether he reads the letter or not."

Sonia nodded slowly.

"I must see David, though."

"It will upset you without doing him any good."

She bit her lip to steady herself.

"Perhaps it will cure him," she suggested.

I was not present when they met; I do not even know how long they were together. Sometime before dinner

O'Rane came into the library and sat down in front of the fire without speaking. From his haggard face I guessed that he had been taken as much by surprise as any of us. During dinner he roused himself with an effort, and I remember that we discussed the coming unrestricted submarine campaign, the danger of starvation, the inadequacy of our food control and the likelihood of finding America ranged on our side in the war. We talked very earnestly—I believe, very intelligently,—as though we had a critical audience and were shewing our best form; but it was wonderfully unengrossing.

"It's just a year since I was in America," I remember beginning in preface to some new argument.

"I say—she told you everything, didn't she?" O'Rane interrupted.

"Yes."

He forced a smile.

"It rather—brings it home to one, doesn't it?"

"And yet—is this any worse for you than when they were living together?"

"I was really not thinking of myself for the moment. My God, Stornaway, if you were a woman and hated a man as she hates Grayle, how would you like to be feeling that he'd had anything to do with your child, how'd you like to go through all this hell of childbirth to bear *him* a child? All your life, even if you came to love it or at least to be kind to it, you'd always be reminded, wouldn't you? You'd trace a likeness, it would seem to get stronger and stronger. . . . I wonder what we should do?"

"I imagine most women would try to stop the child being born."

O'Rane looked up quickly.

"Sonia wouldn't."

"Then I'm afraid she's got to accept this as her punishment."

"Hers?" he murmured.

I made no answer, but my mind went back to the luncheon at Crowley Court, when Roger Dainton sat with

drooping mouth and troubled brown eyes, wondering if he had heard aright that his own daughter was likely to be divorced, waiting to wake up from the bad dream. And I remembered Lady Dainton. She had an adequate allowance of maternal feeling, I doubt not, but on that day she was less moved by Sonia's plight than by a sense of social failure, of a rare and delicate instrument broken—as if after twenty years' training the hand of the violinist was become paralysed.

"It's a bit one-sided, isn't it?" suggested O'Rane quietly.

I still said nothing. Grayle was being punished in the one part of him that I knew to be capable of feeling, but perhaps the punishment did not stop there. For all I could tell he might in time know a pang of desire to see his own child. O'Rane's black eyes were sunk low in their sockets.

"It's damnably all-embracing," I said.

He pushed his chair back and returned to the fire, where he threw himself on a sofa.

"D'you know where George is dining to-night?" he asked. "I want to talk to him. . . . I suppose you think me a great fool, Stornaway, for not seeing it before. I loved her so much, I love her so much still. . . . Anyone can manage a boat when the water's calm, it wouldn't have required much love just to live with Sonia while everything was sunny, but I was prepared to do so much more. . . . When I went down to Melton the night after she left me, I set my teeth and told myself that I must keep my head. I knew it wasn't a trifle, like a fit of bad temper, I knew it was a very big thing she'd done. And I haven't much use for the kind of man who blindly protests beforehand that he'll forgive his wife whatever she may do. . . . It isn't love, it isn't generosity; it's just dam' folly. But I did feel that my love for Sonia would be a poor, cold thing, if it only lasted while everything was going well, if it wasn't strong enough to live through a bad storm. You won't exactly have to strain yourself to imagine what it was like thinking of her with Grayle. . . . I don't know that I can explain, it's all the little things, the little personal

touches that I missed—even without being able to see her. She was such fun, she always enjoyed life and got so much out of it; she made a story out of everything and she loved telling me everything she'd been doing and she knew I loved hearing about it. I missed that frightfully when I was alone at Melton, before she left me; I used to feel quite jealous when I thought of her going about with other people, being a success, when I wasn't there to hear about it afterwards. But I always knew that I should be with her again in a few months. Well, I felt that my love for her would be just like other people's love, if I didn't first of all mind like hell and then recognise that in *spite* of it all, in *spite* of it all . . . You saw me trying to get her away from him—for her own sake; it honestly was; I tried to keep myself in the background. You know I always hoped she'd come back. But now . . ."

He drew his legs up under him and sat with his chin on his fists.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"That's what I wanted to see George about. She must have the house as long as she wants it, and I'll try to persuade Violet to come and look after her regularly when the time draws near. Then if she'd like to go on living here . . . You see, there's rather an important money question. I've got the freehold, so there's no rent to pay, but Bertrand runs the place. He won't stay on with her and without me, and I doubt if we can afford the upkeep by ourselves. I shall make myself responsible for Sonia, of course, but we shall have to cut things pretty fine. George is my trustee, and I wanted to discuss it with him. . . . As regards the child . . ." He paused, and I could see him furtively moistening his lips. "Something's got to be done about that. It *will* be Sonia's child, and, whoever else is to blame, the kid mustn't suffer. If I make George trustee of a fund . . . That gives him an official status, you see; he'd have a voice in the upbringing of the child, the education—I don't trust a woman by herself——"

"Are you—recognising the child?" I asked.

"Certainly." He smiled for the first time. "Poor little devil! it will have as much right to my name as I have. I daresay you know that my father ran away with someone else's wife? Ever since the smash came—I'd never thought of it before—I've been wondering how the other man felt. Fellow called Raynter—he was at the Legation at Berne. My father ran away with her, and Raynter wouldn't divorce her. . . . I've never precisely *liked* being illegitimate, because it seemed a reflection on my father, but I always used to think there was a certain amount of romance about the whole thing. . . . Bertrand knew my mother; he says she was one of the most beautiful women in Europe; my father loved her and they were frightfully happy for the little time that they lived together before I was born. I—I thought it was very fine and plucky of them. . . . But lately I've been wondering what Raynter thought of it all, what kind of life *he* had. I believe he loved my mother too, and it killed her when I was born. I wonder what he thought of the man who'd killed his wife. . . . I suppose you never met him in your diplomatic wanderings?"

"No. He left the service immediately after what you've been describing."

"What happened to him?"

"I believe he took to drink," I said.

O'Rane made a sound of disgust.

"But perhaps it's just because it doesn't appeal to me . . ." he apologised. "I certainly did hope to be finished off in France after I'd lost my sight, but there's such a tenacity about life. I'm glad I pulled through, even to be where I am and as I am now. Yes, I've been feeling that there may be rather more to say for Raynter and—I suppose—rather less—for my father."

He fell to musing, and I smoked in silence until George came in. Then we had the discussion re-opened; Bertrand returned from the House at eleven, and I heard it a third time. If O'Rane hoped for advice or comfort, I am afraid

he did not get it, though Bertrand did indeed tell him bluntly that he was burdening himself needlessly.

"I could have got rid of it all by divorcing her," was the only answer.

"You're not responsible for the child."

"Somebody's got to be."

Bertrand sighed and held his peace, while George and O'Rane talked in undertones.

"What are you going to do yourself?" I asked.

"I've hardly thought. You see, until four hours ago I'd always contemplated having Sonia as—as part of my life. I've got to think things out afresh. . . . But there's plenty of time. For the present, of course, I'm going back to Melton. To-morrow."

"Have you said good-bye to Sonia?" George enquired. "I mean, have I got to explain all this to her?"

O'Rane hesitated in doubt.

"I'm not quite sure. You see, she said she wanted to tell me something, and I went in, and then she told me that she was going to have a child. I can't say if I *shewed* anything—more than surprise, I mean. I said—I really don't know what I *did* say. We talked about how she was, and I said I hoped she was better, and was there anything that she wanted? And she asked me when I was going back to Melton. . . . I told her to let me know if there was anything I could do. . . . We didn't take any formal farewell, but I came away as soon as I could, we weren't either of us enjoying it very much."

"You gather that she proposes to stay here?"

"I think so. And I should tell anyone who asks. This is the natural place for her to be, her friends may as well come to see her. I shall get over to Crowley Court as soon as I can and tell her parents . . . and I think the best thing I can do is to find work of some kind abroad. We've thrown dust in everyone's eyes for fairly long, but it can't go on indefinitely, if she's living here and I never come near the place. . . . I don't know yet; I haven't had time to think. I never thought that her having a child by someone

else could suddenly make all the difference, but it has. I'm not *angry* with her, or *aggrieved,* or anything of that kind, but I've just discovered that she doesn't belong to me any more. I'd still do anything she asked me to do, but something's been killed, something's been taken away. . . . If only someone else were going to benefit by it! I believe I could forgive Grayle, if he'd proved that he was making her happier than I'd done. . . . We haven't made much of a success, have we?"

He smiled wistfully, and his face looked suddenly older, as if the accumulated strain of years had exhausted him. Bertrand took his arm and told him to go to bed. George and I got off our chairs and waited without knowing what to do.

"Is Violet on duty?" he asked. "If you're all going up, I'll come with you and see if Sonia wants anything."

The bedroom door was ajar, and I saw Lady Loring reading a book. She raised one finger warningly, as O'Rane came into the room; then remembered that he could not see the signal and touched his wrist.

"Is she asleep?" he whispered.

"Yes."

He felt his way to the bed and ran one hand lightly over the blankets until it reached the pillow. Then he bent slowly forward, listening to his own breathing, and kissed his wife on the forehead.

"You'll look after her well, won't you, Violet?" he said, as they came to the door.

"Trust me, David," she whispered. "I'll do all I can, and we'll get in a regular nurse to-morrow."

It may have been fatigue, but I thought that she was looking worried.

"You told me this morning," I said, "that a nurse wasn't necessary any more for the present."

"I didn't think so—then, but she's not quite so well to-night. We mustn't talk here, or we shall wake her. You didn't say anything to upset her, did you, David?"

"I hope not. What's been the matter?"

We came into the passage, and George and Bertrand considerately whispered good-night and left us. I would have gone, too, but O'Rane had slipped his arm through mine.

"She's so nervous and fanciful," Lady Loring explained, "that she makes herself quite ill. I suppose, never having been through it before . . . To-night she was quite ridiculous. Didn't it sometimes happen in bad cases that the mother or the child had to be sacrificed? Well, what happened then? And who decided? She worked herself up into the most pitiful state, imagining herself unconscious and at the mercy of a mere brutal man, who could order her to be killed." Lady Loring looked through the open door and smiled compassionately. "She's so afraid of dying, David, that it never occurs to her that this sort of thing is happening every hour of the day and that it's the *exception* for anything to go wrong. I don't quite know what to do about her. . . ."

O'Rane stood for a moment without speaking; then he disengaged his arm and said good-night to us. I heard him busying himself in the library for a few minutes; the front door closed gently, and I caught the sound of footsteps, as he walked away. The next morning he telephoned to ask how his wife was. In the afternoon he called with a cab for his luggage and drove to Waterloo without coming into the house.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SANCTUARY

". . . And I have waited long for thee
Before I poured the wine!"
ROBERT BUCHANAN: *The Ballad of Judas Iscariot.*

I

THE winter months of 1917 passed sadly for anyone who was condemned to live in the depression of London. I was well enough to go back to work in February, but I stayed on at "The Sanctuary," because, with all its nerve-racking discomfort, I had not the heart to go away when both Bertrand and George pressed me so warmly to remain. Three, they said, were less depressing than two, though I came to doubt it. For the tenth time, we seemed to be entering upon the last decisive phase of the war; Germany had begun her unrestricted submarine campaign, it was inevitable that America should abandon her neutrality. (Since the Presidential election and with every day that brought intervention nearer, our press became less scornful of the President; it ceased to misquote and misinterpret phrases about a nation that was too proud to fight or a peace without victory.) But the race would be hotly contested. The submarine campaign at sea, a win-through-at-all-costs offensive on land had to put Germany in a position to dictate terms before the incalculable weight of American arms was thrown into the scale against her.

Men wore grave faces in those days. Though few could give accurate figures of the tonnage which was being sunk daily or of the stocks of food on which we could depend, everyone knew that prices had soared until they had to

be arbitrarily fixed by the Government; everyone knew that already certain foods were unprocurable and that the privations were unlikely to grow less. Meatless days and three-course dinners were but the beginning, and Bertrand, who was by now almost reconciled to the continuation of war in the hope that it would discredit the new Government, shook his head gloomily at me and wondered morosely how long the proud-stomached people of England would consent to go on short commons.

And it was not only in food that the shortage was being felt. Omniscient critics, who had a figure and a date ready for every question, whispered that, since the Somme campaign, we were short of recruits to the extent of a hundred thousand men, and the whisper, growing in volume, was the signal for a campaign, half malicious, half patriotic, and wholly mischievous. The unessential industries must yield up their young men, the civil service must be purged of its indispensables, and, that not even one fish should slip through the meshes of the net, those who had been exempted, rejected or discharged from the army, were required to present themselves for re-examination. The campaign evoked one flash of opposition, not serious in itself, but of interest as a symptom of turbulent discontent; mass meetings of discharged soldiers, each with his silver badge, assembled to declare their intention of not being sent out again until others had done their share.

"The wheel has swung the full circle now," said George one night. "I was up before a board to-day. The doctors seemed to feel that it was a personal score for them that my eyes weren't bad enough for me to be rejected; but, when they came to my heart, they were quite indignant. They *couldn't* pass me on that, but it was a personal grievance and I shouldn't have been a bit surprised if they'd tested me to see if I'd been chewing cordite. . . . I suppose it's not to be wondered at; I'm *not* as keen to go out as I was two and a half years ago; I shouldn't be keen at all, if it wasn't for the feeling that I'm left, that all my friends have been killed. . . . And they must get men from some-

where. This Russian revolution is a very fine and hopeful thing in itself, but the Russians are so much absorbed in it that they can't spare time to bother about the war, and the Germans are withdrawing the best part of their troops from the East. *I* don't know where you're going to get men from. The papers keep yapping about Ireland, but I wonder how many of their inspired leader-writers know anything about the country."

It was one of many discussions, when George would come home late and tired from his office, Bertrand later and more tired from the House.

"If Germany threw up the sponge to-morrow!" George began one night, "what should we have gained? The flower of our manhood's been destroyed, we're smashed financially, the money market of the world has shifted to New York, and we shall spend the rest of our days paying the interest on our debt, trying to repair the damage. . . . I don't care to think of the labour troubles we're going to have when we try to get back to peace-time rates of wages or when the men find that their jobs have been done as well or better in their absence by women. And what's it all for? I get most infernally sceptical at times. As poor Beresford used to prove with chapter and verse, in every war of this kind there's always been a school of optimists to say that such a scourge will never be seen again. And it always *is*. . . . As for social or moral elevation, with the spirit of lynch-law and the methods of the press-gang . . . It'll all be the same!"

"It can't be quite the same after so universal a shake-up," I objected.

George shook his head wisely.

"In the early days, when men of our class were enlisting as privates, even lately, when rankers were getting commissions, I used to think that some of our social angles would be rubbed off, but just you have five minutes' talk with an Old Army officer about the 'temporary gentlemen' in his battalion, who've been fighting side by side with him, mark you! While you're on the desert island, your Ad-

mirable Crichton may come to the top, but once get him back in London with a drawing-room *and* a servants' hall! . . . I agree in theory with people like Raney, who say we must get value for the lives we're spending, but I can't do it! Nobody can do it. The men out there who are paying the price want to forget about the whole thing, they'll come home at the end as they come home now on leave, to attend to their own affairs, to enjoy themselves, to make up for lost time and recapture the years they've wasted in the trenches. And the people who've never been out have forgoten all the old good resolutions; they're as tired of the war as the soldiers, tired of drudgery, discomfort, economising; they want to forget it and enjoy themselves and get back to the old life. Frankly, Storn-away, it still makes you sick to hear of the way our prisoners are treated and that sort of thing, but you don't any longer regard this war as a crusade, do you? There's too much eighteenth-century diplomacy about it, too many compensations, too much balance of power. It was one thing to send a forlorn hope to Belgium, one thing to say that the German military machine must be broken, but when it comes to conscribing men to coerce Greece or win Constantinople for Russia . . . I wonder when the accursed things *will* end."

Bertrand roused himself to light a fresh cigar. From the angle at which he held it in his mouth, no less than from the way that he screwed up his eyes and peered into the shadows of the rafters, I prepared myself for a paradoxical and probably pretentious generalisation.

"I sometimes feel that war is the new expression of our national activity," he began. "Don't the Rolls-Royce people build only for the Government? Well, that's typical of a gigantic state-socialism which has grown up in a night; you can't build a house or buy a suit of clothes until war-needs have been satisfied. Production, transport, distribution have all been taken over; you've an army of controllers directing the machine; and in time we shall dress as we're told, eat the quantity of food we're allowed, move

here and there, do this and that, as we're ordered. At one age we shall be drafted into the army, at another we shall be knocked on the head to save feeding; there'll be birth-rate bonuses amounting to state-subsidised polygamy. . . . Everything that a man did in the old days for his own benefit or amusement,—his daily task, his career, his material output, his accumulation of wealth, his pioneer-work in developing and improving the world, his family-life, even—will now be directed to feeding the war. I don't complain; we're united in a labour gang of forty million souls, and our job is to turn out a better war than Germany. I don't see where it's going to stop and I don't see who's going to stop it. Not the soldiers, because they're shot if they disobey an order; not the Government, because they're the Board of Directors."

"You'll only stop it by a general strike at home," George answered reflectively.

Bertrand spread out his hands with a gesture of sweet reasonableness.

"And who's going to carry through a general strike? The people with small fixed incomes can't make themselves heard, and, for all the rise in prices, your industrial wage-earner has never been so prosperous; besides, whenever prices become *too* high, the Government steps in and controls them, subsidises producers. Again, it's not pleasant to be told that your sons and brothers are being killed because you won't turn out shells."

George wriggled his shoulder-blades impatiently.

"But, if you make it plain that you're not going to turn out shells, the killing stops automatically. If *anyone* would only come off the high horse and discuss concrete terms!"

Bertrand shrugged his shoulders and blew a scornful cloud of smoke.

"But people are getting used to the killing," he objected. "Three years ago—take anyone you like, Jim Loring; he could only die as the result of illness or an accident; even if there *were* a war, he wasn't a soldier. And it came like a sort of icy grip at the heart. . . . Nowadays a man be-

comes a soldier, whether he likes it or not, at eighteen. They get mown down at twenty instead of dying in their beds at seventy. And, as we grow accustomed to it, on my soul! George, we cease caring. People who come back from Paris tell me that there's a sort of hedonistic fatalism there —the restaurants never so full, money never so prodigally squandered. And anyone who knows anything knows that French credit in America is *gone!* So it isn't the calm, undismayed spirit of the Spartans at Thermopylæ; it's hysteria, carelessness. I've little doubt that with certain obvious differences you'd find the same thing in Berlin, assuredly you'd find it in Vienna. And we're getting it as badly."

It was due to the house in which I lived, but I suddenly realised that for a twelvemonth my emotions and interests had strayed from battlefields where thousands of men were daily laying down their lives for conflicting ideals; they were engrossed in the contemplation of a middle-aged bachelor, taking advantage of a blind man to carry off his wife. And Mrs. Tom Dainton, one of the earliest widows in the war, had married again. And Lady Maitland and her friends were wondering whether the risk of sudden death would nerve young Pentyre to marry Lady Sally Farwell.

"You're not very encouraging, Bertrand," I said.

"And yet, if you take a long view, you *can* see light," he rejoined unexpectedly. "The same scientific development which gives you chloroform gives you also poison gas; and, until you can disarm the world and make one nation of it under a single police, each war becomes more horrible than the last. At the same time international divisions and values may be becoming obsolete; the stronghold of Gibraltar may be the target for long-range Spanish guns; we may all of us thankfully throw down our weapons before we have to fight under changing conditions. You remember when war broke out, George? You were going to stay with Jim Loring, and I went to Paddington with you; we all shook our heads gravely and said, 'Thank God! We're an island!' Well, insularity

would have been a source of greater weakness than strength, if the perfection of submarine warfare had gone *pari passu* with the development of trench warfare; and we may want to cry 'quits' before the submarine makes any further progress. Or take aerial transit. With any luck, George, you'll live to see mail and passenger services through the air all over the world. Germany can't get to the Far East without the leave of Russia, she can hardly get to America without sending her air-ships over someone else's territory. All these international barriers have changed their values."

George looked at his watch and dragged himself to his feet.

"I think I shall turn in. A discussion of this kind is very purifying for the soul, no doubt, but it doesn't get you any forrarder. Dear old Raney could usually be counted on to produce some Mark Tapley consolation at the end of the evening, but I doubt if even he's got any superabundance at the present time."

Bertrand emptied his tumbler, and we moved slowly towards the door.

"Have you heard anything of him since he went back?" I asked.

"He's written once or twice on business. I send him a line two or three times a week to say how Sonia's getting on, and I'm going down there for the week-end pretty soon. You can't tell much from a dictated letter—or from *him*, if it comes to that," he added with a sigh.

It must have been two or three days after this night that Lady Loring came to me with a worried expression and the announcement that Sonia would have to keep her bed until after her confinement; against this sentence the doctor allowed no appeal. Thereafter I found myself spending a considerable portion of the day in the sick-room. Sonia had overcome her earlier antagonism and after her first unburdening of spirit was prepared to discuss herself and her history with a frankness that amazed me until George told me that it was one of her most unchanging characteristics and one that was not solely stamped upon her by a desire

to talk about herself. At the end of a week I had received a full and most unflattering account of her girlhood.

"I was frightfully attractive, of course, but I must have been odious," she began engagingly. "Every other woman hated me, and I used to take it as a great compliment, but I don't think I should now. I want to be liked, I always *did;* but I never took any trouble, I went out of my way to exasperate men. I don't know why people stood me—people like George, I mean, who didn't pretend to be in love with me. I must either have been a first-class flirt, or I must have been a genius, or else I must really have had qualities that I didn't recognise."

I had a full history of her engagement to Loring, over whom her facile triumph had exasperated her, so that she picked quarrels day by day until the engagement was broken off and she made, if not the match, at least the most widely discussed scandal, of the year.

There was another man called Claypole or Crabtree (as she always alluded to him as Tony I never entirely discovered his surname) to whom she had been engaged before Loring came on the scene. I had his history, too, sandwiched between accounts of the men whom she had not married for one reason or another, and the rich Jews like Sir Adolphus Erskine, whom she had fascinated and bled; throughout she talked like an artless child describing her first ball. On some subjects she was inexorably reticent; I never heard why she had fallen in love with O'Rane and married him, and in all the hours that I sat with her she never alluded a second time to the stages of her estrangement from her husband. An hour daily for a fortnight told me little, perhaps, about Sonia, but it shed a searching light on girls of the class to which she belonged.

2

As the days went by I found myself allowed to spend less and less time with Sonia. She had hypnotised herself into beli[illegible] a matter of duty and necessity, that she

was ill, tired and suffering at a time when half the amount of persuasion would have made her feel that she had never been more comfortable in her life. It was hardly cowardice, for George had told me anecdotes of her endurance in the hunting-field which shewed that she was capable of supporting pain; but the obsession made her a difficult patient.

"Only three weeks more," I used to be told; "only a fortnight more."

Then she began to count in days, and I saw her face lengthen and her eyes dilate, as though the Wild Ass's Skin were shrinking in her hand. She was morbidly curious to find out from Lady Loring how much unavoidable pain she would have to feel; the doctor was questioned again and again until he warned her that she was preparing the gravest consequences for her child and herself. And it was after he had gone that she whispered a terrible prayer that the baby might be born dead.

When the conversation was reported to me, I felt that drastic steps would have to be taken, if she was to be kept from going mad herself and giving birth to an imbecile. I took George into my confidence and sent him for his week-end at Melton with a string of rhetorical questions and a bulletin which brought O'Rane the same night to London, where he stayed until Sunday evening, while his neglected guest billeted himself on the Headmaster and accepted the hospitality of the Common Room. I was by myself, dozing over a book, when the library door was flung open, a gigantic Saint Bernard ambled in and a drenched and breathless figure demanded if anyone was there.

"What on earth brings *you* to London?" I asked.

"Sonia. I gathered from George . . . I say, something's got to be done, you know."

He stood with his eyes open and set on me, his lips parted to shew a gleam of white, and one hand mopping his coat, more, I think, for distraction than in any hope of drying it.

"I don't quite know what you think you can do," I said dubiously.

"If she's awake——" he began eagerly.

"You'd frighten her out of her wits," I interrupted. "And you can ask Lady Loring, if you don't believe me. What you *can* do—to-morrow morning,—is to let it be known that you've come up—to lunch with a man or collect some books—and, if she'd care to see you, she can. But I think you've rather acted on an impulse, you know."

"I couldn't stay down at Melton, if there was anything I could do by coming up."

"I'm afraid that you'll find that there isn't."

His underlip curled obstinately.

"We'll see. I took a solemn vow that I'd see her through . . ."

I said nothing, remembering that he was Irish and a romantic; his simple-minded talk of oaths and obligations belonged to another age and another land.

In the morning I asked Lady Loring whether it would be prudent to let O'Rane see his wife. I was referred to Sonia herself, who received the news of her husband's presence without visible surprise and hesitated for what seemed five minutes before answering. Then she picked up a hand-glass from the table by her bedside, looked long at her reflection and laid it down with a sigh; there was a second spell of indecision before she told me she was not well enough to see anyone.

"I think she's gratified by your coming," I told O'Rane, "but she'd rather not have any visitors at present. It's not hostility to you, but a woman loses her looks to some extent at a time like this, and I think she's sensitive about it."

"But she *knows*——" He interrupted himself suddenly, and his voice became softly wistful. "D'you appreciate that I've never seen my wife since she *was* my wife!"

"I don't think *she* always does," I answered. "But the trouble in her mind won't be removed by your sitting and talking to her sweetly for half an hour, when she doesn't want to see you."

O'Rane's normal composure was breaking down, but he recovered himself with an effort.

"I might have been a rather more civil host to George, at this rate," he murmured.

At dinner that night we talked of a subject which illness and other work had driven into the background. The war had shattered many of my fine boasts of what I would do, if I were a millionaire, and new outlets had to be found for the Lancing fortune. I had already decided that Ripley Court could be put to no better use than as a richly endowed haven of rest for those whom the war had made incapable of ever helping themselves again. There were men, I knew, concealed mercifully for themselves and the world from inquisitive or pitying spectators, who had marched into battle and returned from the operating-theatre blind and without limbs, mere trunks surmounted by sightless heads, yet—I was told—glad to be spared even such life as remained to them. They were to be my first care, and, when the last had died, there would still be sufficient incurable cripples without the adventitious aid of modern warfare to keep my hospital full. There was opportunity, too, for bringing comfort and resignation to the demented, the paralysed and the blind. As I saw O'Rane's interest quickening, I told him that I wanted him to be one of my trustees.

He hesitated until I feared that he was going to refuse.

"*One* of them?" he asked in doubt.

"I shall appoint several, but they must be all young men; I want the best of their lives."

"If I act," he answered slowly, "I should have to act alone. I'm in the early thirties still——"

"You would find it more than one man's work."

"Ah, but I could give the whole of my life to it." I started to interrupt, but he raised his hand. "And, furthermore, I should allow you to impose no conditions; the money would have to come to me as it came to you, and you would have to let me play ducks and drakes with it as I liked——" He paused to laugh wistfully. "You've had

admirable opportunities of observing how satisfactorily I arrange my own affairs; but I couldn't undertake the responsibility otherwise. You see, you might try to impose conditions that I didn't like; and then my heart wouldn't be in the work. Or your conditions might become obsolete with the changing state of society, as has happened with every trust that has been in existence for more than a hundred years. But, above all, you know that, if you want to help your fellow-creatures, you must do it at discretion and not by looking at a deed to see if you're allowed to. Do you know the story of Bertrand's fifty-pound note?"

"I don't think so."

O'Rane's eyes lit up with laughter.

"Get him to tell you the full saga; I can only give you a synopsis. Years and years ago some man asked for a loan of five hundred pounds, and Bertrand, to cut the interview short, said he'd present him with fifty. The man said he didn't want it as a gift, wouldn't take it as a gift.

" 'Well, please yourself,' said Bertrand; 'you call it a loan, and I'll call it a bad debt; but I'm very busy, and you won't get any more. Good morning.'

"The man talked a good deal about impending ruin, hinted at suicide and told Bertrand that he would be responsible for turning an honest woman on the streets. Bertrand went on with his writing, and eventually the fellow pocketed the note and got up.

" 'I hope to pay this back within three months,' he said stiffly. 'It's not what I expected, but I can't afford to refuse it.'

" 'Don't pay it back to me,' said Bertrand, who was beginning to feel rather ashamed of himself. 'Hand it on to someone else who's in a tight corner, and, when *he's* ready to pay it back, he can lend it to his next friend in distress.' Then a little bit of the old Adam peeped out, and he added, 'Remember it's a loan; you must tell the next man so and you've no idea how many men and women we shall save from ruin and suicide.'

"Well, Bertrand never expected to hear another word,

but a year or two later, he received a letter of thanks from a young barrister, whose wife had had to undergo an operation; then from a doctor in Sunderland who hadn't known how to pay his rent; then from a girl who'd lost her father and wanted money to pay for learning shorthand and typing. The fifty pounds have been in circulation for about eighteen years, and from time to time Bertrand still gets a letter from some out-of-the-way corner of the world. . . . Of course, I'm living on charity now, but, when I was competing equally with my fellows, an odd fifty pounds might have come in very handy. That's what I mean by helping people at discretion."

"There's a difference between fifty-pounds and twenty-five million," I pointed out.

O'Rane smiled to himself and then shook his head.

"Not so much as you might think," he said.

"I wonder how you'd use it."

His face became slowly fixed and grim.

"I wouldn't let any boy go through what I've had to face," he murmured. "It may be fortifying for the character, but that sort of thing can be overdone. The Spartan youth who allowed a fox to gnaw his vitals ended up, I have no doubt, with an immensely fortified character but also with a grievously impaired set of vitals. You know, a boy without parents——"

He broke off and began to whistle to himself; then remarked unexpectedly:

"I wonder whether *this* will be a boy. . . . But, boy or girl, it must be an awful thing to lie waiting for the birth of a child that you hate in advance, that's got to be hidden——"

He buried his face in his hands and sat without speaking.

"Is that what's happening?" I asked, for Sonia had never consulted me even in her most expansive moments.

He nodded abruptly.

"She doesn't want anyone to know that she's ill or *why* she's ill; no one else does, and we trust all of you. As soon as the child's born, it's going to be smuggled away. . . . It

will be properly looked after, of course, and all that sort of thing, but it will never be allowed to know its own parents. All the arrangements have been made, and I gather that the doctor has been—most sympathetic and helpful." He smiled with scornful bitterness and sat for a minute without speaking. "I was surprised to find a woman like Violet touching the suggestion with the end of a pole; she was a bit surprised, too, I fancy, because she sort of excused herself and hoped Sonia would relent later on, but it was absolutely necessary to humour her in every way at present. . . . That kind of thing always sticks in the throat of a man—like a woman who refuses to have a family at all. . . . I don't know, I suppose I'm superstitious; I should feel that, if I brought a child into the world like that—furtively, shamefacedly, wrapping a blanket round it and carrying it out of the back door in the dead of night . . . Wouldn't you, too, Stornaway? Wouldn't you feel that you were putting a curse on the poor little brute? And I can't imagine a woman deliberately doing that to another woman's child—let alone her own. Picture the child—later on—growing up. . . . Even if it never knows the manner of its birth, wouldn't you rather expect it to learn stealing in a Dickensian slum and to end up on the scaffold? I suppose it's all very fanciful and morbid. . . . But the other seems so infernally unnatural. I thought it wasn't *done*. I thought a mother would no more treat her own baby like that, whatever the provocation, than a man would hit a woman in the breast."

At O'Rane's age I might have thought the same thing.

"Doesn't anybody else know?" I asked.

"George may have told the Daintons; *I* didn't," he answered, smoothing the wrinkles out of his forehead. "We shall all have to rack our brains before the time comes, God knows. Violet says I must make a point of being in the house in case anything happens. If Sonia—dies, I mean, it would look funny my not being with her."

"And if other people *have* to be told?"

O'Rane's nose came down on his upper lip in a withering sneer.

"I suppose it means one or two trusty and competent nurses, and the child will be kept in another part of the house. And, later on, London air won't suit it, and it will be sent with a governess to the sea, educated abroad. . . . My God! *I* was educated abroad!" He coughed apologetically and relieved his feelings by pacing up and down in front of the fire. "Where had we got to?" he asked absently. "Oh, yes! Well, a boy like that—I assume for some reason it's going to be a boy—might owe the whole of his career, his life, his happiness and power of doing good entirely to a chance meeting with some man who chose to pay three hundred a year on his account for so many years. But it's the personal touch, the personal relationship that must be established!" He swung round in his walk and faced me. "All my life I've wanted to be Prince Florizel!" he cried. "I wanted to be able to lend a hand to distressed young Americans who found unexpected dead bodies in their Saratoga trunks, I wanted to find comfortable and remunerative positions at my court for the conscience-stricken survivors of the Suicide Club. But with the untrammelled disposal of your estate——"

"Wouldn't it pall, if you didn't have to make the money before you gave it away?" I asked.

"I don't think my interest in human beings would ever pall," he answered. "There's such a devil of a lot of them, and they're all different. When I got into the House, I stood as a Tory, and George was rather offended, because he said I was the most revolutionary nihilist he'd ever met. I could never call myself a democrat, though, because democrats deal in mobs, and I only see a mob as composed of individuals, all different, all absorbingly interesting—with bodies to be kicked and souls to be damned, if your preference lies that way. I can't deal with people as *types*. I can't classify them; each one is much too real, too personal. And, if you're like that, you end up as a nihilist, because all government is based on generalisations,

mostly inaccurate and wholly inadequate. As we're finding out." He put his watch to his ear and listened. "I must be making my way to the station," he said. "I'm not taking an active party line at present, but I seem to find a growing sense that the old governing classes haven't measured up, haven't made good in their own job. We've had three specimens since the war started. . . . I always feel that in universal nihilism I should come to my own. Now I must fly! Forgive me for talking so much!"

3

George returned to London the following day in a better temper than, I fear, would have been mine, if I had been invited to the country and abandoned by my host within an hour of my arrival. Melton week-end parties have long been famous, for Dr. Burgess has had through his hands perhaps a fifth of the younger statesmen and barristers, authors, clergymen and soldiers of the day. Any old Meltonian can claim a bed, and it will be found for him in his old house, at the Raven or in lodgings; he dines on Saturday night in Common Room as a matter of course and lunches with Burgess next day as a matter of right. Strangers from less fortunate foundations are jealously excluded, but I attended one dinner as a Governor and found a Law Officer on my right, a silk from the Commercial Court on my left and a twice-wounded Brigadier opposite me. The food was tolerable, the wine good; the conversation indiscreetly well-informed. George told me that, when he was in the House, he could only find out what was going on by spending a week-end at his old school.

"I had one bad moment on Sunday afternoon," he confessed, when I asked for news of O'Rane. "We'd all been lunching with the old man, and he asked me to stay behind. It was rather reminiscent of certain regrettable meetings in my extreme youth. . . . I knew what he was going to talk about and I knew it would be no good for me to beat about the bush. The door had hardly closed before

he put it to me what was the matter with Raney. I had to tell him everything, you can't hide things from Burgess. For that reason I wasn't sorry that Raney had bolted here; he'd never forgive me, if he guessed I'd given him away."

"But it won't make any difference, will it?" I asked.

"Oh, Burgess has got too much of God's commonsense. But Raney can't stand being pitied. Burgess will only allude to it, if he convinces himself that it will do some good. I'm afraid I don't see how it can; poor old Raney's just got to set his teeth once more and go through it single-handed. . . ."

A week later Bertrand, George and I were gossiping over a last cigar, when Lady Loring entered with a grave face. The doctor had that moment left after his evening visit to Sonia.

"I think it's time we sent for David," she said without preamble.

"You're certain?" I asked. "He's in the middle of term."

"If we're keeping to our plan," she answered unenthusiastically. "Any moment now——"

Bertrand stumped across the library to a writing-table.

"I'll send him a wire," he said. "Time enough for appearances, if he turns up in the course of to-morrow. How is she?"

Lady Loring shrugged her shoulders carelessly and then turned quickly away.

"She's all *right*—physically," she answered. "But if you left a bottle of prussic acid within reach . . . That's what frightens me so much. Until to-night she was so keen to go on living that she could face almost anything, but to-night I believe she doesn't care about it any more. She wants to slip away and end everything, get rid of all her difficulties. . . ."

4

O'Rane arrived at "The Sanctuary" next day half an hour after I had finished luncheon. This time his wife consented to see him, but only after some hesitation.

"*You* mustn't go away!" she whispered to me. "If you —if you see I'm getting tired, you know . . ."

O'Rane came into her room with a smile, kissed her hand and then felt for a chair, where he sat in silence for perhaps three minutes until Lady Loring entered to say that it was time for her patient to rest.

"I never asked how you were feeling," he said, as he got up to go.

"I'm all right—at present," Sonia answered. Then a shiver ran through her, communicating itself to her fingers until I saw his hand tighten over them.

"It's going to be all right, Sonia," O'Rane whispered.

She lowered her eyes and stared dully across the room.

"It *can't* be all right."

"I'll make it all right."

The corners of her mouth began to droop miserably.

"Of course, if I die . . ." she began with a catch in her breath.

O'Rane dropped on to one knee and drew her two hands into his own.

"It's much more fun living, sweetheart!" he whispered. "And you're going to live, you're going to make whatever you like of your life. If you want me, I shall always be at hand, as I am now; and, if you don't want me, I shall keep away. I owe you so much, my darling; you must give me the chance of paying you back a little bit. When we married, I didn't give either of us a fair trial, I forgot the life you were accustomed to, I forgot that my own life wasn't like everyone else's; I just went ahead, doing everything that came natural to me, and it never occurred to me that I was making you unhappy. Forgive me, Sonia!"

She dragged one hand away and covered her eyes.

"I don't know that *I've* got much to forgive," she murmured, and I could see her lips curving to a wistful smile.

"I shouldn't have asked you, if I didn't need it. Sonia, you're going to be brave, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

The lines of her throat tightened.

"You know what my promises are worth, David."

"If you promise, I know you'll keep it. And then I shall want another promise—two more, in fact. I want you to promise not to worry, and you must promise not to feel any pain. Will you do that, sweetheart? I've come up all the way from Melton, you know."

She withdrew her hand, and I saw that her face had become suddenly pale and that her eyes were tightly closed.

"I can't promise that, David."

His voice caressed her, as though he were talking to a child.

"I think you can, darling. Do you remember when you sprained your ankle, skating at Crowley Court, and you started to cry with the pain and I said I wouldn't carry you back to the house until you'd promised to stop crying and not to let the ankle hurt any more? You promised quickly enough then, and it's much more important now. If you'll promise that now, I'll do anything you like."

She smiled wistfully a second time, then drew his head down to her own and whispered something. I heard him say, "You won't. I swear you won't, Sonia." Then he drew himself upright, waved his hand and walked to the door.

I sat with him in the library, while he attacked a belated luncheon and plied me with questions about his wife. Her whispered request, he told me, was that she might, if possible, be kept from seeing the child when it was born, and on this he hung a string of questions to find out what steps we had taken to secure the best doctors and nurses, when the birth was expected, whether anyone else knew.

"*We*'ve told no one," I assured him, "since you asked us not to."

"I told Burgess," he said. There was a long silence. "I —told him everything. . . . I mean, one *does* with Burgess. I found it wasn't news to him. George had told him —weeks ago. . . . One *does* with Burgess," he repeated, smiling.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He was rather helpful."

"George told me that he wouldn't trouble to talk to you about it unless he saw his way to help you," I said.

O'Rane finished his meal and lay back in his chair.

"I went in and told him that I wanted a day or two's leave, if he could possibly spare me; I told him Sonia was going to have a child. . . . He waited for some time and then said, 'The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?' Said it as if he meant it, too; it was like trying to get extra leave in the old days; as a rule he'd accept any excuse, however bad, provided it was given in good faith; I once got an extra half for the whole school because it was so hot that, as I told him, we'd much *prefer not* to be working. . . . Well, I told him the whole truth—all about Sonia and myself, all about Grayle. . . ." He paused as though breathing hurt him, then smiled wearily.

"It may have been good for my humility of spirit, but I can't say it was very edifying for Burgess. . . . I told him that Sonia's been dancing in the shadow of a volcano, that we were always on the verge of an appalling scandal and that it was more by luck than anything else that it had been averted. I described to him how we'd smuggled her home and what we were going to do to keep the child away from her. . . . Have you ever told a long story and discovered at some point that it's falling extraordinarily flat or that someone's shocked? Burgess never *said* anything, and of course I couldn't see his face, but—I don't know whether you understand me—the silence seemed to become more intense at times. I felt that his eyes must be on me and I—not to put too fine a point on it—I began to feel rather frightened. . . . If I could have *seen*. . . . I knew from his voice when he first spoke that he was sitting down; and I suddenly remembered a most awful row I'd had with him when I was about sixteen. He sat there then with his back to the window, and I stood in front of him arguing and arguing; it was a little matter of discipline, and he'd

decided to fire me out. . . . Well, I went through just the same thing this morning. I—I felt I was owning up; and I'd have given anything in the world to see his face. . . . You know how you spin out the explanation . . . and rather overdo it . . . you're *too* plausible and you feel the whole time that you're not getting it across. . . . I went on and on . . . and finally I stopped short; it wasn't any use, he knew everything—even if George hadn't told him. . . . I became stiff and dignified and said once more, 'If you can shift the work round so that I can be away for a day or two——' Then I heard him scraping for a light—and sighing—and throwing the matches away. . . . God! until you're blind, you've no conception how many things you hear. *You* wouldn't notice the sound of a wooden match falling in the grate, but *I* did; and, though I've given up smoking because I can't taste tobacco, I felt a little smarting at the back of my nostrils as Burgess got going with his pipe. . . ."

If ever a man talked to gain time, it was O'Rane at that moment.

"What advice did he give you?" I asked him at length.

"He didn't give me any—*advice*. But, when I'd finished, he said he'd pull the time-table about and that I could stay away as long as I liked. I *knew* he'd say that. Well, in the ordinary course I should have said 'Thank you' and cleared out, but I didn't find it easy to move. Burgess sat there, sucking at his pipe; I stood there—and I felt a perfect fool, because I was beginning to blush. And the old man said, 'Well, David O'Rane?' and I said, 'Well, sir?' And then there was another silence. And then he said, 'Thou hast no further need of me'—You know the way he talks? I *did* thank him then and was starting to the door, when he called out, 'Thou art at peace in thine own mind?' That rather stung me, and I told him that, all things considered, I didn't think I was wholly to blame; and he answered rather enigmatically that, if I wasn't careful, I *should* be. I asked him what he meant."

O'Rane left his chair and took up a familiar position at

the fire-place, resting his arm on the high chimney-piece and leaning his head on the back of his hand.

"Burgess is a curious man," he resumed dispassionately. "I don't think he ever had any children of his own, but he's got—well, an extraordinarily human imagination. He began talking about this poor kiddie—who isn't born yet—and pointing the contrast between *his* life and the life of any other boy, who'd have a father and a mother fussing round him, whenever he had a bit of wind in his poor little tummy, and playing with him and watching him, as he began to crawl and talk, and trying to make him understand that it wasn't the end of the world when he was miserable trying to cut teeth. . . . The old man didn't spare me," said O'Rane with a quivering laugh. "I had about twenty years of the boy's life compressed into twenty minutes; the way he'd go to school, frightfully shy and with no one to see him through, no one to give him half a sovereign at mid-term; and the way he'd get a remove or find himself in the eleven—with nobody to brag about it to; and the way he'd go on to a public school and work his way through the green-sickness period of dirty stories and foul language—without anyone to tell him that he was becoming rather a pitiable little object. . . . And the portentous age, when he'd be head of his house, and the days when he'd want to ask his father what Oxford used to be like in the prehistoric days. . . . After twenty minutes or so I told Burgess that I didn't see it was *my* look-out."

"Well?" I said, as O'Rane hesitated.

"I think it was damned unfair," he burst out, but the resentment in his tone was unconvincing. "Burgess was a friend of my father, he knows all about me, I've told him every last thing about myself. . . . I don't suppose even George knows, but the old man used to invite me to help tidy up his library, if I wasn't taking Leave-Out, and of course I was as happy as a clam; and we used to talk, and I told him things that kept me awake half the night,—but he always seemed to have forgotten them next day. Well,

I suppose after my father died I *did* have rather a—crowded youth; and Burgess asked me if I wanted to send my son through the same mill.

"He's *not* my son," I said.

"Thy wife's son, laddie," he answered.

O'Rane turned wearily from the fire and began to pace up and down the room.

"I *told* him!" he exclaimed. "I said that, if it hadn't been for that, Sonia and I could have forgotten everything and come together again. *You* remember? I was ready—ah, dear God in Heaven! I was ready! And then I heard that this had come between us, that there was going to be a permanent reminder, a permanent barrier, a permanent alien *something* in our lives. That was the first time I saw you were right, the first time I appreciated we could never forget and go on as if nothing had happened. My love for Sonia hasn't changed. If—if anything happened to the child . . . But as long as it's there! I told Burgess that, though I agreed with him in principle, I was very sorry, but I couldn't help it. It was Grayle's business. He asked me if I thought Grayle was likely to accept his responsibilities; I told him I saw no indication of it. He said nothing to that, and I made another bolt for the door. He called me back and asked what I proposed to do. I said I'd told him already.

"He didn't stop me, and I got back to my rooms in the Cloisters. I began to pack a few things, but the whole time I was feeling that I hadn't explained properly and that Burgess rather despised me. I got extraordinarily excited and angry over it, until at last I left the packing alone and went back to his house to justify myself. The man shewed me at once into the library, and it was only when I got inside that I realised that all this time Burgess ought to have been taking the Sixth for Tacitus. Instead he was still in his chair, still sucking at his pipe. I fired away, full of indignation, and went through the whole weary business from the beginning, just as I'd done before. He never interrupted me, never said a word till I'd finished. Then

he told me pretty bluntly that he was only indirectly interested in me and that what he wanted to find out was why the child should be penalised, why I, who knew something of what it would have to go through, persisted in making it face the music for no fault of its own. I was pretty well worked up, but I tried to be reasonable and asked him what he suggested I should do. He never hesitated a moment this time! He told me it was my duty to treat the child as if he were my own son, never to let him or anyone else know what had happened before he was born, but to devote myself to him as if he were—well, *not* my own son, *not* someone for whom I was *naturally* responsible, but someone who'd been entrusted to my *care*. He said, if I didn't —with the experience I'd got to back me . . . Somehow, the way he put it, Stornaway . . ."

He brought his walk to a conclusion as abruptly as the sentence and dropped heavily on to a sofa, as though glad that a necessary task was finished, yet awaiting criticism from me and obviously prepared to argue as vehemently against me on one side as he had argued against Burgess on the other.

"In practice, what do you propose to do?" I asked.

"I've been trying to think the whole way up from Melton. I suppose we shall have to behave as though the whole world knew Sonia was going to have a baby, it will have to be our child. And I suppose we shall live like other people who are kept from divorcing each other because of their children. Nominally we shall share the same house, and I suppose things can be arranged so as to spare Sonia. . . . But Burgess has convinced me. We've no right to think of ourselves or wash our hands of responsibility or try to score off other people at the expense of the child. I've promised her that she shall never see it. . . . I don't know, I suppose this is one of the things that men and women are temperamentally incapable of seeing with the same eyes; but, who*ever* the father was, what*ever* the history, I should have imagined that any woman would fight for her child against all the powers of creation; it was

like a stab when Sonia first said she hoped the child would be born dead, it was another stab when she begged me—*begged* me to promise. . . . I promised right enough; it was the only thing to do, but I can't let it rest at that. If she's well enough to talk, I want to make everything quite plain to her now; otherwise I must explain afterwards. . . ."

As we finished dinner, Lady Loring came down to say that Sonia was asking for her husband. I was not present, I am glad to say, at their interview, but it did not last more than five minutes, and at its end O'Rane looked in for a moment to say that he proposed to walk as far the House of Commons for a breath of fresh air. Neither by word nor tone did he invite anyone to accompany him; and on his return he went upstairs without coming into the library. I called for a bulletin on my own account before retiring for the night, and Lady Loring warned me that I must be prepared for anything at any moment. Sonia had worked herself from hysteria into something hardly distinguishable from delirium; forgetting that she had already seen her husband, she had sent for him a second time and a second time implored him to spare her the sight of her own child; Lady Loring, who had been on duty all day, was not allowed to rest, and, as I passed the door, the lights were burning and I caught the sound of voluble chatter.

For an hour I tried to sleep, but the intermittent hum of voices, the creak of feet passing rapidly up and down the passage, still more the indefinable suspense kept me awake. For another hour I tried to read, but I was always interrupting myself to listen; and at two o'clock I pulled a dressing-gown over my pyjamas and returned to the library. To my surprise Bertrand was dozing over a book, while George sat writing letters on his knee. Both looked up, blinking with dull fatigue, as I came in.

"I wonder how long this racket's going on," Bertrand growled, as he walked across to fetch himself a drink. "She'll kill herself at this rate. And—what—*almighty* fools—the three of us are—to be here at all!"

"Has Raney come back yet?" George asked me. "I was told he'd gone for a walk—like a wise man."

"He was sitting outside her door, as I came down," I answered.

Grumbling inarticulately, Bertrand went back to his book. George looked at me long enough to see that I was too tired to talk, then began a fresh letter. I prowled in front of the bookcases, trying to find something that I had the mental energy to read. It was shortly after four when O'Rane hurried silently into the room and telephoned for the doctor.

5

Thirty hours—the fag-end of a broken night, a day and another night—passed before O'Rane appeared. The painful silence of the house was violated only by guardedly light steps and hushed voices. Bertrand and George took their meals at the club; I stayed behind, neglecting my work and subsisting on tinned tongue, stale bread and cold water, to run errands, answer telephone calls and carry up trays of food to Lady Loring. At first I believed that poor Sonia was trying to hypnotise herself and intensify her own tortures, but in time a new gravity settled on the faces of the doctor and nurse.

I had never before been in a house where a confinement was taking place; I do not wish to repeat the experience. Whenever I carried up a meal, Lady Loring or the trained nurse would say vaguely, "I'm afraid she's having a bad time," but for the rest I was left to myself in the great silent library with my senses strained to catch any sound from the familiar white bedroom where I had spent so many days with Sonia, trying to distract her thoughts. O'Rane, from the moment when he telephoned for the doctor, had been with her. There was some ineffectual attempt to banish him from the room, but Lady Loring afterwards let him stay and admitted that his personality was keeping Sonia from the surrender which she sometimes seemed ready to make.

When he came into the library at breakfast-time on the second day, his clothes were shapeless and dusty, his face unshaven and grey with fatigue.

"The doctor says it's a boy," he told me hoarsely. "Is there any water in the room? I've had nothing to eat or drink since first I went up there; and then I must get some air into my lungs."

He sighed and dropped limply on to a sofa.

"How's Sonia?" I asked him.

"They can't say yet. She's doped. They've given her as much as they dare, as much as her heart will stand. . . . My God! I'm glad I'm not a woman! I can understand their having *one* child, because they don't know what's in store for them, but their courage in having a second . . . !"

I poured him out a cup of coffee and buttered him two slices of toast.

"I wouldn't try to talk overmuch," I told him.

"It's a bit of a relief to me," he answered with a smile. "All this time——" He lifted his right hand above his head and began stiffly to open and shut the fingers. "I was gripping her wrist," he explained; "I only let go twice, and the first time it was bruised purple, as if she'd shut it in a door. . . . And nobody *said* anything. . . . Sonia kept getting spasms of pain which made her moan or cry out, and her nerve gave way from time to time . . . and then I—I tried to hypnotise her, I found that by repeating 'Sonia, Sonia, Sonia,' very distinctly and very low, I could capture her mind. . . . God! how it got on my nerves!"

The first cup of coffee was followed by a second, which he gulped in scalding mouthfuls, asking at short intervals what the time was and how long he had already stayed away.

"Violet and the nurse are pretty well beat out," he explained; "I want to pack them off for a bit of a rest while I mount guard. And we've got to shift the boy before Sonia comes round . . ."

"You're not moving him—yet?"

"Only to another room. I—I promised her, you see."

He bade me a hurried good-bye and disappeared upstairs until the middle of the afternoon. George came in after luncheon, put half a dozen breathless enquiries and returned hot-foot to his office. Bertrand had a question in the House, but, as soon as he could get away, he came and demanded a full report.

"You don't gather when the child's to be moved?" he said, when I had done. "I—— This is an extraordinary business, Stornaway. I've lived a devil of a long time and I've done some pretty odd things and mixed with some pretty curious people and all that sort of thing, but I'm hanged if I've ever done anything like this before. What *are* we all up to? I feel I've been stampeded."

"Well, neither of us is doing anything very active," I pointed out, looking at my cigar and book.

"We're *countenancing* it. If you sat by and watched a drunken man making pipe-lights out of five-pound notes . . . *What* have they decided to do? I don't understand them; I can't keep pace with them."

In so far as I had been admitted to O'Rane's confidence, he had decided to keep the child in London until it could be safely moved and then to send it with its nurse to a cottage which he had mysteriously acquired on the South coast. And there his plans for the time being had ended.

"He's apparently committing himself to three households," Bertrand cried. "The first because his wife refuses to live with him, the second because he wants to make his friends believe that they *are* living together, the third because he requires a home for his wife's child, which in time will come to be regarded as his child. . . ."

"*I've* got no influence over him," I said in protest against his tone of injury.

Bertrand shook his head gloomily.

"When once he's made up his mind—it doesn't matter how fantastic a thing may be. . . ."

The door opened, and O'Rane came in to repeat his request of the morning for water and any food that was

available. He had found time to shave and change his clothes, but I have never seen a man more utterly exhausted.

"Is there any news?" Bertrand asked.

"She's doing—very fairly, I think," he answered with a drawl that was almost a stammer. "The effect—drug, you know—wearing off. She woke up—for a few moments. Now getting some natural sleep."

I put a stiff dash of brandy into the water and watched O'Rane's grey cheeks colouring.

"Did she seem comfortable?" I enquired.

"Comfortable?" he repeated with a laugh. "The physical *relief,* you know. . . . Whatever happens now, she's free from pain, she's bound to feel better and better. . . . When I was wounded, there were times when I thought I couldn't bear it; the nurses told me that I said quite clearly, 'It's *no* use hurting me any more; I *can't* stand it.' Dear souls! as if *they* could help it! And one *did* stand it. . . . But, when the pain began to abate, when you didn't have to keep yourself braced up against it, I went as limp as a rag. It was like the end of a long fever. . . . After that, whether I was asleep or awake, I always knew that the real hell was over. There might be little twinges in unexpected places, but the pain was *over, over.* And the feeling of weakness was so delicious! Like an endless repetition of the glorious moment when you're just dropping off to sleep. . . . That's how Sonia is now."

The next report came after dinner, when the doctor had concluded his evening visit and she had been put to sleep for the night.

"She's had a frightful time," he told us, "and there's always the possibility of a relapse, but I know she's not going to relapse, I'm not going to let her."

"And the child?"

"Oh, he's all right."

The next morning O'Rane joined me at breakfast after a night's unbroken rest. Despite a mild protest from the nurse, he had insisted on staying in Sonia's room and had

slept in his clothes on the floor for twelve hours on end.

"She's had a wonderful night," he told me, exultantly. "And the boy's doing magnificently. They seem to think it'll be reasonably safe to move him to-morrow. And then, if all's well with Sonia, I shall go back to Melton. I shall only want to talk to her, if I stay any longer; and, as it is, if a board creaks or anyone touches the bed . . . That good angel Violet has promised not to go until *every*thing's all right. Don't you think she's been wonderful? Violet Loring, I mean. I'd got no sort of call on her."

"I don't know that the baby upstairs has any great call on you," I answered.

"We—ell, you can't open an account with a thing twenty-four hours old," he laughed. "I say, Stornaway, I had no idea that babies were so *small*. Hullo, that's Violet's step! There's nothing wrong, is there?"

Lady Loring had come in to say that Sonia was asking for him. He hurried upstairs, leaving his breakfast unfinished, and did not return for a couple of hours. I asked him whether there was anything amiss, for there was an unfamiliar frown on his face.

"No, but it was curious . . ." he began hestitatingly. "You remember how she made me promise. . . . Well, I went in and asked her how she was, and she said she was feeling better. . . . And then she asked about the child . . . wanted to know whether it was a boy or a girl . . . wanted to know how it was. . . . It ended by my carrying him in for her to see. . . . I was in two minds whether to do it, because she was working herself up to a pitch of great excitement, but I thought it would only make things worse, if I refused. She wanted to see what he was like, you know, whether there was even the remotest resemblance. . . . She gave a sob, when I brought him in, and said, 'He's got my eyes.' I'm afraid the whole thing excited her rather. She suddenly got the idea that she oughtn't to have asked *me* to bring him in. Poor mite! he's not responsible for his own father, and I told her that if we started quarrelling over a thing like that . . . An-

other curious thing, Stornaway; I have always imagined that I should hate the very existence of the child; when I was first told what was the matter with Sonia, I felt that there was a sheet of fire between us. I don't feel that now; I feel that Grayle has passed utterly out of our lives. As for punishing that poor, helpless little creature . . . I suppose you hate babies, but I wish you'd have a look at this one and tell me what he's like. I've always thought what fun it would be to have a son and watch him growing up. . . . I should have thought that Sonia, that *any* woman, after all she's gone through . . . Still, when you've been treated as Grayle treated her, when you've waited in dread and horror all these weary months . . ." He broke off in perplexity, which only lifted when he suddenly began to smile. "You *will* have a look at him, won't you? And tell me what he's like. He's going to the country to-morrow."

After dinner that night I made my way to the bedroom which had been temporarily converted into a nursery. It was dark and empty, and I walked to the door of Sonia's room in search of Lady Loring. A low sound of voices penetrated to the passage: I knocked and went in to find O'Rane standing by the bed with a thickly swathed child in his arms, while his wife lay with her hand in Lady Loring's, looking up at him.

"I hope you're feeling better," I said to Sonia.

"David says you haven't even seen him yet," she pouted, disregarding my words. She stretched our her arms to the slumbering child. "Darling, you're being rather left out of all this, aren't you? But if you *will* go to sleep when the loveliest things are being said about you . . . My blessed, I've waked you!"

There was a half-perceptible movement under the long shawl. O'Rane's arms began to rock gently.

"Take him back, David," Sonia begged. "And then just come in for one moment to say good-night. I feel so feeble that I simply can't stand more."

As he left the room, Lady Loring nodded to me, and I

prepared to follow her. Sonia was lying with closed eyes, but, as I moved, she raised herself and beckoned with one hand.

"Mr. Stornaway! Just one moment before he comes back! They want to take my baby away. I know I asked them to, but that was *before*. . . . You won't let them, will you? He's mine, mine! David thinks I'm saying it because I ought to, because everybody would expect me to, but I'm not! On my honour I'm not! I'd go through it again rather than let them take my baby away."

"He won't be taken away, if you want to keep him," I promised her. "Good-night, my dear Sonia. Go straight off to sleep and don't worry about anything. If you want your child, David won't try to steal him. You're sure you want him?"

"David?"

"I meant the boy."

A smile dawned on her tired face.

"I want so much! I always have. . . . Oh, I know you despise me, and you're quite right. I despise myself. But I *must* be loved, I can't get on without it. And I've been, oh! so lonely!"

She gave a little sob. I felt a hand on my arm and turned to find Lady Loring shaking her head and pointing to the door.

"Tell me anything I can do to help you, Sonia," I said, "and I'll do it. Now good-night. You've got to go to sleep, and I shan't let David even say good-night to you."

I met O'Rane in the passage and carried him off to the library.

"Lady Loring wants to get her off to sleep," I explained. "You and the child between you have rather excited her. If you will take my advice, you'll go back to Melton by the first train to-morrow. The two of you are wearing each other out. I'll do whatever's necessary here."

"But I can't leave her yet."

"You can and must. You've got your work to do. O'Rane, you may remember that I've advised you a good

many times to face facts and end this business. In your greater wisdom you've always refused——"

"You never seemed to appreciate that I loved Sonia."

"Indeed I did. But I thought we agreed that there were some tests which the greatest love in the world couldn't survive."

He took up his stand by the fireplace, smiling to himself and rocking gently from heel to toe with his hands in his pockets.

"I thought so, too. But wouldn't it be a fair-weather love? I treated Sonia badly, and she treated me worse. Until I married, I always thought that marriage was an easy, straightforward business; you just fell in love, and there was an end of it. If I spoiled her life because *I* hadn't the imagination, the consideration . . . I'm sorry, Stornaway, I can't discuss it. One's pride is rather involved. I always *said* that I loved her more than a man had ever loved a woman before; if I can't prove it . . . But I'm boring you."

"I'm only tired. So are you, so's everyone. We'd better all go to bed. Promise me one thing. If you go in to say good-night to—your wife, don't stay more than a moment."

THE END

HV2345 c.1
M19s
McKenna, Stephen
Sonia Married

Date Due

HV2345 c.1
M19s

AUTHOR
McKenna, Stephen

TITLE
Sonia Married.

DATE LOANED | BORROWER'S NAME

Reference Copy